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THE CASE FOR THEOLOGICAL ETHICS _

An appreciation of Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr as moral theologians.

Submitted by Eric Crawford Hamlyn

Qualification for which it is submitted - M. A.

University of Durham

Department of Theology. 1990

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THESIS: The Case for Theological Ethics: - An appreciation of Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr as moral theologians.

The purpose of this thesis is to test the hypothesis that Christian ethics is not merely a department of general ethics, but is essentially theological. The reason for choosing these two theologians is that Brunner is in danger of eclipse, and Niebuhr deserves to continue being widely read. The thesis attempts to exhibit the methods each used to clarify the Christian faith and relate it to selected structures of society.

METHOD: The thesis proceeds thus:

- 1) The first chapter is biographical and a study of their respective environments, as well as an appraisal of other theological and secular positions contemporary with them.
- 2) The second chapter is an examination of how each dealt with the subject of natural law.
- 3) The thesis moves on to examine their views on the questions of love, law and revelation.
- 4) At this point the thesis deals with both theologians separately to evaluate their particular emphases.
- 5) The final part of the thesis examines how each applied theological issues to particular situations. Those selected are 'The State' and 'The Problem of War'. The reason for the choice is that both were writing at a particularly turbulent period of world history. This part of the thesis is descriptive and not critical and is intended to serve as illustrative of the methods they used to apply theology to social and political issues.

INTRODUCTION

Christian social ethics is a complicated subject. First, there are many variations in the interpretation of a social norm. If ethics are to be applied to social institutions then they will vary according to the social environment. For example, we can suggest that democracy is a description of a desirable social and political system. That is not the same as asserting that it has particular ethical merit. It could be argued that a benevolent patriarchy has as much ethical value as a democracy, and in applying ethical theories to such a system, one would use different methods from those applied to a democracy. All methods of establishing order within a state are open to ethical enquiry. Totalitarianism runs the risk of power being abused, and democracy runs the risk of those in power manipulating a situation in order to retain power. It follows that those who write about social ethics must have a grasp of the various forms of social institutions in various societies.

Secondly, the word 'ethics' presents us with complications. Ethics is basically an examination of the means whereby we can establish the realities of right and wrong, good and bad. Further, ethics needs to establish whether or not there exist universally valid conceptions of right and wrong, or whether there are relativities which make some actions right some of the time, and the same actions wrong some of the time. If one concludes that there are in fact universal values, then one needs to examine the nature of the authority which codifies those values and which enforces them. Therefore, secondary to the subject of ethics, but important to it, is the subject of the nature and validity of authority. Apart from the suggestion that most people believe that there are such concepts as good and bad, there is remarkably little consensus amongst moral philosophers as to how to reach a conclusion. Between classical theories of natural law, and thorough-going existentialism, there is a wide range of ideas and methods which have formed the basis of some variety of ethical teaching.

Thirdly, the use of the word 'Christian' in a study of social ethics does not in fact narrow the range of ideas very much. Within the traditions of



Christian moral teaching there have been as many schools of thought as there have been in the teaching of ethics as a purely philosophical, or secular exercise. This thesis sets out to discover, from the writings of Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr, to what extent Christian ethics is part of theology. The question that we are asking here is whether Christianity has a unique system in answering ethical questions, based on theological doctrine, or whether secular ethics can be used by theology to address the questions. Further, apart from the answering of specific questions, the thesis attempts to deduce that the whole ethical 'process' is, for a Christian, different. From there we need to address the question which arises, which is that if Christian ethics is distinctively theological, does it have any application to those without faith?

There are, I suggest, good reasons for choosing the writings of Brunner and Niebuhr. As we shall see in the thesis, both addressed themselves, as theologians, to ethics in particular. They were contemporary with each other, one in Switzerland and one in America. Both were 'Protestant', influenced by Lutheranism, liberalism, and the findings of nineteenth century Biblical criticism. They both steered a course between the thorough-going Protestant stance taken by, for example, Karl Barth, which insisted on all theories being dependent upon 'Justification by Faith' and 'Revelation', only perceivable by the believer, and, on the other hand, the position taught by much of the Church, which depended on natural law as the ultimate determinant. They were familiar with each other's writings and had a great respect for each other - whilst not agreeing with each other all the time. We shall see that their disagreements were more about style and emphasis than about substance.

One might expect that a thesis on ethics might give ethical answers to particular ethical questions. A comparison between two moral theologians might concentrate on how they apply their theology to moral issues. This thesis, however, is concerned, not with particular ethical questions, but with the theological thinking that forms the basis for answering such questions. It is true that all theories have to be tested and applied to particular issues. To that end, at the end of the thesis, I have examined Brunner and Niebuhr in their thinking about the 'State' and about 'War and

Pacifism'. These chapters are entirely descriptive and not critical. They are given as examples of how one might apply their particular theological views to social and political institutions. I have chosen these particular issues because of the turbulent period during which each of them wrote. They each experienced the rise of fascism and communism and events of two world wars. In any case, the Christian's view of 'The State' is of permanent interest.

In dealing, then, with their theological writings, the point must be made that both were prolific. It would be impossible in a thesis of this scope to deal adequately with all that they wrote. Further, much has been written about them, and in particular about Niebuhr, who is still a theologian of considerable interest. I have therefore chosen themes common to both of them which I believe illustrate their concern to keep the study of ethics within the study of theology. Niebuhr's principal work on ethics is *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which will be referred to frequently in the thesis. In this he sets out a doctrine of the nature of man - tainted, as he says, with sin, and his relationship through redemption with God. The parallel work of Brunner's with this is *The Divine Imperative*, arguably the most important work on the theology of ethics to have been published for a very long time. This will also be referred to frequently - and in particular the passages which talk of the 'Divine Human Encounter', (incidentally the title of another of his books which we shall examine) - a thesis which owes much to Martin Buber's work *I and Thou*.

As well as these there are other works which will be looked at in the course of the thesis, a list of which is to be found in the bibliography. At this stage it is relevant to point out certain titles that are significant. Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* was influential far beyond theological circles. Also significant were two books published soon after that. *Reflections on the End of an Era* and *Beyond Tragedy* are Christian interpretations of history - a life-long interest of Niebuhr's. An early work of his, *Leaves from the Notes of a Tamed Cynic* provide interesting insights into Niebuhr's thoughts - and the way in which they developed in his early years when he was a pastor in Detroit. Essays and articles about Niebuhr are still being published. Kenneth Durkin's *Reinhold*

Niebuhr (Geoffrey Chapman 1989) is a series of chapters which trace Niebuhr's development of thought, from primarily that of a political philosopher to that of a more consciously serious theologian. Niebuhr's shift in opinion over the years justifies the claim that he was more of an 'organic' theologian than a 'systematic' theologian. In 1988 Larry Rasmussen edited and commented on a very useful collection of Niebuhr's writings which make a broadly similar point. Perhaps one of the most useful of recent books is that edited by Richard Harries, *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of our Time*, a selection of essays by both British and American theologians which is consciously more 'theological' than some other works.

I have given details of footnotes at the end of each chapter throughout the thesis. However, full details of the various publications are given in the bibliography at the end of the thesis.

Brunner, in this country at least, has not received anything like as much attention - and indeed is in danger of being eclipsed. This is unfortunate, since his writings on ethics are genuinely original, and I believe *The Divine Imperative* to be the best treatise on theological ethics to have been written in this century - a claim I hope to justify in the course of the thesis. It may be that his rift with the mainstream of Zurich theologians in the nineteen thirties, and in particular with Karl Barth - an issue we shall examine - is responsible for his comparative decline in popularity and influence.

THEMES

I turn now to the themes I have isolated as being important in achieving the aim of arguing for a theology of ethics. In the first chapter we shall set the two writers in the context of other theological and philosophical thinking. This will be partly biographical, and partly an exercise to examine their relationship with other writers. It will also aim at identifying particular themes which they pursued.

Following that there will be a study of natural law. This is because a great deal of moral teaching in the history of the church has been related to natural law. They both reject natural law as a basis for Christian

ethics - but since it has been, and still is, so influential, I feel it must be examined, and their handling of the issue must be examined. We shall see how they differed on this in some respects - although Brunner claims, as we shall see, that he was misunderstood by Niebuhr.

The third chapter will deal with the relationship between 'love' and 'law'. This will include an examination into the concept of revelation, and, in particular, the possibility of a 'general' as well as a 'special' revelation - the point of difference between Brunner and Barth.

The next stage of the thesis looks at Brunner and Niebuhr individually - and attempts to pinpoint particular characteristics and emphases which contribute to their unique contributions to the ethical debate.

Finally, as we have already explained, we look at two specific moral and ethical situations where their thinking is applied. Again, I stress that this is descriptive and not critical.

I hope to demonstrate that both deserve comparison with each other, and also that Emil Brunner deserves wider readership than he currently enjoys. There are theologians who have a large posthumous following. Niebuhr is one, and I believe Brunner should be another.

Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr: an explanation of the comparison.

Five theologians, Barth, Brunner, Tillich, Bultmann and Niebuhr were contemporary with each other. All of them were born in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and all of them were original scholars with prolific writings and with international influence. Further, they were all Protestant, claiming to be strongly influenced by Luther and, to a lesser extent, Calvin. They all wrote in the wake of the movement of "critical" biblical scholarship and were in that sense "modern". All of them wrote with Christology at the centre of their thought and the great Pauline doctrines of Justification by Faith, the Nature of Grace and the Cross were for them of paramount significance.

They all experienced the twentieth century tragedies of war and the rise of totalitarianism, both fascist and communist. Niebuhr described fascism as "moral cynicism" and communism as "moral utopianism" (1) A further common factor was the re-emergence of the emphasis on the concept of Revelation and the question that they addressed themselves to was not, primarily, what man should do in response to God - but what God has to say to man, and, through man, to the world.

In a contribution to Kegley's *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, entitled "Some Questions on Brunner's Epistemology", Paul Tillich, describing a social occasion with Brunner in his apartment, has this to say:

It seems to me that in spite of the many divergences which exist between you and Barth, and Bultmann and Niebuhr and myself, a kind of common ground in theology has developed in our generation. (2)

Of these five, two, Brunner and Niebuhr, addressed themselves to the study of ethics in particular. Although they differed in their views in many respects it is important at the beginning of a comparison to note their similarities. In an autobiographical introduction to Kegley's *Reinhold Niebuhr, His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, Niebuhr says:

"I may say that Brunner's whole theological position is close to mine, and that it is one to which I am more indebted than any other. I say this

though in recent years our respective treatment of the ethical problem has diverged rather widely, through his increasing adoption, and my increasing rejection, of the concept of 'Natural Law'".

Natural Law is an important element in the debate on Christian Ethics. There have been those who reject it completely, and those who regard it as an essential element. We shall deal briefly with the history of Natural Law theory, and, in particular, with the way in which Brunner and Niebuhr handled it, in the next chapter.

As well as this difference there is the accusation on the part of Niebuhr that Reformation Theology was not sufficiently dialectic, and that Brunner, and indeed Barth, who claimed to be dialectic theologians, were not, in Niebuhr's view, 'dialectic' enough. Niebuhr does not in any way throw away his Reformation heritage, neither does he blame it, but he believes that the truly dialectic nature of the Christian faith was not sufficiently exploited. On this point Niebuhr is very clear. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* he says:

Reformation insights must be related to the whole range of human experience more 'dialectically' than the Reformation succeeded in doing. The 'yes' and 'no' of its dialectical affirmations; that the Christian is '*justus et peccator*'; that history fulfills and negates the Kingdom of God; that grace is continuous with, and in contradiction to, nature; that Christ is what we ought to be and also what we cannot be; that the power of God is in us in judgement and mercy; that all these affirmations which are but varied forms of the one central paradox of the relation of the Gospel to history must be applied to the experiences of life from top to bottom. (3)

A further reason for justifying a comparison between Niebuhr and Brunner is their different environments - one in America and the other in Switzerland. Niebuhr owed a great deal to European dialectical theology, although it would be wrong to regard him as merely its American voice. In the context of early twentieth-century America, Niebuhr set himself the enormous task of bringing Protestant ideas and insights to bear on social and political

issues. The same is true of Brunner in the context of totalitarian Europe, and we shall see how their different interpretations of the value of 'Natural Law' led them to their conclusions. We shall also see that, in spite of their differences, their closeness was more significant. This consisted of their Christocentric view of theology, the placing of theology at the heart of ethical questions so that ethics becomes theological rather than an 'extra' to systematic theology, and their similarities of view on the great issues of 'grace', 'justification' and 'love'. Further, both in their work ventured into the area of anthropology, perhaps more wittingly in the case of Brunner than in the case of Niebuhr.

The major part of thesis will deal with the theological and philosophical basis of the thought of Brunner and Niebuhr. The last two chapters will give examples of their application of theory to practice. In view of the scale of the task it is intended to use two examples of a practical application in a descriptive manner. Clearly, since we are dealing with two major theologians, it will be impossible to examine all that they wrote, but it is the intention of this thesis to show that both placed ethics in the centre of theology, and also, by comparing the two, it is intended to demonstrate that Niebuhr, about whom much has been written, has a place in twentieth century Protestant Theology, outside the confines of Europe, and not merely as an American spokesman for European Protestantism. A further intention of the thesis is to demonstrate that, although Emil Brunner is somewhat in eclipse at present, yet his contribution to the ethical debate is too important to be lost completely.

If we are to understand the similarities and differences of Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr, it is essential first to locate their work in the context of their lives. We now turn to their biographies, drawing out those details which are most relevant to our subject.

EMIL BRUNNER was born in 1889 in Switzerland. He expressed great pride in his native country, remarking that it is the oldest republic in Europe, dating from 1291, and that it is the meeting place for much European culture, evidenced by the fact that there are four languages, French, German, Italian and Romanish. In order to express the degree of Brunner's

pride in his native country he interprets its structure in the following terms.

The Swiss Federation forms a happy synthesis between the federal principle of the rural confederation and the majority rule of a modern parliamentary democracy. This connection makes possible a fruitful relationship between authority and freedom, thereby providing a harmonious compromise between group interests and the freedom of the individual (5)

Thus Brunner was able to assess the nature of Swiss society by saying,

In spite of modern industrialisation, the opposing interests of capital and labour did not produce a real class struggle,

And again:

In Switzerland we have a European microcosm in which Protestants and Catholics, rural and urban populations, Latin and German cultures exist side by side . (6)

It is important to realise that in extolling the virtues of his own country, and in pointing to the strengths within it, Brunner did not in any way fall into the trap of equating it with the Kingdom. In his lifetime he was to see the danger of placing patriotism, and, in the case of Fascism, racism, into a prime area of thinking. His view of the State in relation to the Kingdom was, for Brunner, a very important insight and one which affected much of his thinking. He says:

I am not unaware of the fact that we are 'strangers' in this world, nor do I say that the best of all solutions for our social problems is that same goal which is in the centre of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. It is one of the basic errors of our time, a superstition of the whole of modern history, that a just and free order of society somehow comes

closer to the message of the Kingdom of God than the decisions on the individual, personal realm. The New Testament leaves us in no doubt on this point. It is indeed our duty to try to make the power of Christ operative in the socio-political realm as well as in others. However, in this particular area, the love commandment will, at best, find expression in a very indirect sense. This can take place much more immediately on the level of direct interpersonal relationships. This insight has become decisive for my whole thinking. (7)

We shall see later in the thesis how Brunner placed emphasis on the 'individual' and on the 'personal'. We shall also see how he translated this insight into his view of the 'State' as a concept, and in his view of the Christian's place in the State.

Brunner's father was a schoolteacher and he was from a family of non-believers. His mother, however, was a Christian and the family was drawn into the Religious Socialist Movement led by Christoph Blumhardt, Leonhard Ragaz and Hermann Kutter. The Church in Europe had just begun to take note of the Industrial Revolution. Kutter wrote "*Sie Müssen*" (They Must) in 1904. This portrayed the Social Democrats as bearers of the Kingdom of God. Its message was a shock to the Church since in the prosperity of Switzerland scant attention had been paid to social, political or even moral issues. As a result of the book several pastors joined the movement, which claimed to differ from Marxist scientific socialism as well as from the American concept of a Social Gospel. Of the Religious Socialist Movement, Brunner had this to say:

During my years of study this movement drew me into its orbit more strongly than the theological liberalism that dominated the scene. (8)

Brunner became a student at the University of Zurich, a place strongly in the critical tradition of theology. It was here that he sought a scientifically satisfying formulation of his faith. In philosophical terms he found this in Kant and he used the concept of "duty for duty's sake" as a formula for much of his reasoning. In this he was encouraged by Heinrich Barth, the brother of Karl Barth, whom he said he found much

easier than his famous brother, in terms of personal relationships. Later, in spite of the great respect that Karl Barth and Brunner had for each other, they were to differ deeply on the question of natural and revealed theology and the impassioned nature of their disagreement is well documented in Brunner's book *Natural Theology, Comprising Nature and Grace* and the response from Barth - "Nein". This issue will be examined later in this thesis. Suffice it to say at this stage that Niebuhr took Brunner's side in this dispute, in spite of Niebuhr's claim that the question of Natural Law had led to a departure from Brunner in his thinking.

At Zurich Brunner studied, along with philosophy, social economy. However his main concern during his studies was the Nature of God. His teacher, Kutter, was a scholar who probed deeply into the Lutheran tradition of theology, and who also made a study of the Greek philosophers, and in particular Aristotle. He made a point of synthesising Augustinian and Lutheran ideas with neo-Platonism. Brunner found this impossible to accept and he said;

As a result of being immersed in the thought of Martin Luther and becoming intimately acquainted with Kierkegaard, this synthesis was slowly but decisively dissolved. (9)

In 1911 Brunner received his doctorate of Theology and in the same year he visited Berlin. On this occasion he met with Harnack, who is frequently described as the founder of liberalism in theology. Brunner has little to say of this visit, dismissing the experience in these words.

Neither the theology of Harnack, nor the atmosphere of the great metropolis, nor the state of Wilhelm II made much impression on me. (10)

This lack of interest is connected with his description, quoted earlier that the Religious Socialist movement was more powerful an influence on him than liberal theology. His views of this were to change after the outbreak of World War I, but at this stage, Religious Socialism was still the more attractive option.

A visit to England in 1913 and 1914 made a great impression on Brunner. Doubtless more would have been said about this period if it were not for the fact that the outbreak of hostilities between England and Germany interrupted the visit. During his time in England Brunner made contact with the Christian Labour Movement who had close ties with the Fabian Socialists. He translated speeches into German which were given at the annual Christian Labour Movement meetings at the Browning Settlement. The "Brotherhood" movement was thriving in England, and through this he met William Temple, with whom he was to form a life-long friendship. Temple, although later burdened with high office in the Church of England, retained a life-long concern for the study of Christian and social ethics. It is interesting to speculate to what extent the thought of Emil Brunner - clearly not matured at this stage - would have had on Temple had their meeting not been interrupted by war. Even so, there was a considerable exchange of views between the two in the 1930's.

Also during this visit Brunner made contact with socialist leaders, including Campbell Bannerman. He also attended various courses and conferences organised by the "Christian Adult School Movement", and delivered a number of papers and lectures. Brunner sums up his experiences of his visit to England thus:

"In the course of this work, (with the Christian Adult School Movement) my opposition to the atheistic, pseudo-scientific Marxism was intensified, rather than abated". (11)

We saw earlier that the Religious Socialist Movement claimed to be different from scientific Marxism, and the growing influence of Marxism during this period probably accounts for Brunner's increased opposition to it.

1914 saw Brunner as a Swiss soldier. His experience of European war made him lose faith in the Religious Socialist Movement, although his Christian faith remained strong. On his release from the army in 1916 he was appointed a pastor at Obstalden. Of this he says, "I was a Pastor with my

whole heart". There is a clue here to the claim made earlier that moral theologians are naturally more drawn to the world of people and real life in order to facilitate their observations and ethical perceptions. Likewise, Niebuhr spent the first thirteen years of his ministry as a pastor in Detroit, an experience that was profoundly influential in his thinking. In the case of Brunner it must be said that although he was a prolific writer and an undisputed academic, yet his interest in the world and in Church affairs continued throughout his life. Pastorally, internationally and ecumenically, Brunner was a considerable force - and on his retirement from his University post, he held office with the YMCA and spent time studying Church life in Tokyo.

In 1917 he married Margril Lauterburg who was the niece of Hermann Kutter. After the birth of their first child, Margril enabled Brunner to take up a fellowship at the Union Seminary in New York. This was arranged by Professor Adolf Keller, largely as a result of Brunner's publications and experiences in England. This also was to have a profound effect on him, and linked him closely and permanently with the English speaking world. Of this visit he writes:

In the autumn of 1919 I sailed from Le Havre for the first time to the New World. At this point in my life history I cannot avoid pointing to the way God's hand led me. For this year in America provided the foundation for my particular fruitful contacts with the English speaking world for the rest of my life. At the hospitable Union Seminary I was not much intrigued by the reigning theology (McGiffert's Ritschlianism and W A Brown's Mediation Theology) but rather by my encounter with the American people. I was impressed by the particular character of their democratic institutions (to which, when viewed historically, we owe as much as they to ours.) (12)

The period in America led to a degree of isolation from the rising European theologians, and, in particular to the group in Zurich and Berlin. In this period many had come to realise that Religious Socialism needed to be re-appraised. Such a re-appraisal went to the roots of the movement, which was the message of Christ itself. In this context and with this insight

Brunner encountered Karl Barth for the first time. Barth was at this time himself a Pastor in Switzerland. In 1918 he published his *Romerbrief* - the formidable commentary on Romans. Brunner says that he hailed it as a forceful confirmation of his own thoughts, and in his review of it in *Kirchenblatt für die Reformierte Schweiz* he pointed to its epoch-making character. There were two reasons for his enthusiasm. The first was its examination of those doctrines which were to feature largely in Brunner's ethical analysis - justification by faith, the nature of grace and the atonement; and the second reason was because Barth came from the circle that included Blumhardt and Kutter - formative influences in Brunner's life.

It was in 1921 that he wrote *Experience, Knowledge and Faith*, and in 1924 there appeared his book *Mysticism and the Word*. This was a critical assessment of Schleiermacher, who in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had broken away from the dry and imperious Protestant dogmatics, shifting the starting point from creeds and other official formularies to the nature of religious experience as present in individuals. In the same year Brunner was appointed Professor of Systematic and Practical Theology at the University of Zurich - a post he held until 1955.

During this period Europe saw the rise of totalitarianism. Fascism and Communism were regarded by Brunner as equally evil and godless. Communism he saw as banishing the Church, and Fascism as manipulating it with powerful heresies. In both cases Brunner's condemnation lay in the fact that both taught that man is not responsible to God, but is to be regarded merely as a functionary of the state. Man, in Brunner's view, could only be judged from within the *ecclesia*.

In 1932 Brunner published *The Divine Imperative* - his most important treatise on ethics. He complained at the time that the English translation of the title failed to express the double aspect of command and orders which were described by the title in German: "*Das Gebot und die Ordnungen*". The book was in fact confiscated by the Nazis and destroyed. It was to be published with ecumenical funding after the war. This book will form a

major part of this study of Brunner's ethical teaching. It is where he expresses the view that the fundamental question, "What should I do?" is a question which stands at the entrance to the Christian Faith, and that the man who has experienced God will never approach this question in the way that he would have done before his experience of God. This puts ethics firmly in a theological context.

There followed a study of anthropology. Brunner said of this:

"Every political and social system grows out of a particular concept of man." (13)

This led to the publication of *Man in Revolt*, again confiscated and destroyed by the Nazis and subsequently published after the war. It is interesting to note that Niebuhr's major work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* was published eight years after *Man in Revolt*. Thus Brunner's deliberate study of anthropology preceded that of Niebuhr, and came after major theological works - whereas until that time much of Niebuhr's writings were political and social. We shall note this later in the thesis when we examine the progress of Niebuhr's thinking. Philosophically, for Brunner, the Rationalism about "man" was overcome by the "I - Thou" concept rather than the "I - It" concept. In this he was greatly influenced by Martin Buber, and in 1936 Brunner published *The Divine Human Encounter*. In this he saw religion, and subsequently ethics, as a result of an encounter between God and an individual. Here he places Biblical understandings of truth against Greek understanding. For Brunner, now it is God who communicates himself. This pits him against the Aristotelean and, later, Thomistic approach, and Brunner's use of 'Natural Law' owes nothing to classical Catholic teaching.

It is important to understand that Brunner, as well as being an academic, was also a Churchman. He was involved deeply in the Ecumenical Movement and in the domestic affairs of his own Church. He consistently claimed that his greatest delight was the pastoral ministry and his family, and this warmth in human relationships can be observed even when he tackles the most critical theological issues. An example of this will be seen when we look

at the controversy with Karl Barth on the subject of "General Revelation". It will be noticed that his dealing of the subject is a great deal less terse than that of Barth.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR (1892 - 1971)

The writings about Reinhold Niebuhr are almost as prolific as his own writings. He captured the imagination of many both within and outside the Church. Richard Harries describes him as the most influential theologian of the century in the realm of public affairs. He was admired by Adlai Stevenson and Arthur Schlesinger among others, and in Britain his admirers included Dennis Healey and Tony Benn. Richard Crossman said of him:

' Moral Man and Immoral Society was one of the books which changed my life. It was the most exciting shock intellectually that I had as a young man, and I'm still recovering from it. (14)

Niebuhr was born in 1892 in Wright City, Missouri, where his father, Gustav was minister of the German Evangelical Synod. Niebuhr grew up as the "child of the manse". Niebuhr says that his father was the first religious influence in his life, combining a vital personal piety with a complete freedom in his theological studies. His siblings included Helmut Richard, likewise a distinguished theologian and ethicist; Hulda, a practitioner (and later professor) in Christian education; and Walter, who worked as a journalist and film maker, rather than in the ecclesiastical world.

He studied at a seminary at Elmhurst and later at Yale University, where he received his MA before taking up duties which were to last for thirteen years as the pastor of an evangelical church in Detroit. These days are vividly recorded in his *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. As is often the case with diaries and notebooks, there is here a great deal of information which tells us of the kind of man Niebuhr was. There is a combination of modesty, and almost of confusion, about his worth as a pastor, coupled with a fearlessness when confronting issues which he saw as

having ethical implications. Thus he describes the reaction to an early sermon that he preached in his church.

I preached a sermon the other day on the 'Involuntary Cross', using the text of Simon of Cyrene bearing the cross of Jesus. A good woman, a little bolder than the rest, asked me in going out whether I had borne many crosses. I think I know a little more about that than I was willing to confess to her, or to the congregation, but her question was justified. (15)

Niebuhr was twenty three when that entry was made.

A few years later, in 1920, another entry gives us a clue to Niebuhr's realisation of the necessity of placing ethics within the Christian Gospel.

I think that since I have stopped worrying so much about the intellectual problems of religion, and have begun to explore some of its ethical problems, there is more of a thrill in preaching. The real meaning of the Gospel is in conflict with most of the customs and attitudes of our day at so many places that there is an adventure in the Christian message, even if you only play around with its ideas in a conventional world. I can't say that I have done anything in my life to dramatise the conflict between the Gospel and the world, but I find it increasingly interesting to set the two in juxtaposition at least in my mind and in the minds of others. And, of course, ideas may lead to action. (16)

Already, Niebuhr is setting out to discover ethical insights based on theological reflection. It happened during his years as a pastor, and supports what we have already said, that moral theologians are at home in the world of people in their normal environment. Ethics is concerned with choices that are made in the social and political structures of society, as well as within the context of the family, and the area of personal morality.

Later still, in 1927, as Niebuhr came to the end of his pastorate in Detroit, he attacked vigorously the "American Dream", in the form of the

Ford Motor Company. By this time it is clear that he has become vigorous, confident and influential in relating the world of industry and commerce to the issue of social justice. His entry reads thus:

"The new Ford car is out. The town is full of talk about it. Newspaper reports reveal that it is the topic of the day in all world centres. Crowds storm every exhibit to get the first glimpse of this new creation. Mr Ford has given out an interview saying that the car has cost him about a hundred million dollars and that after finishing it he still has about a quarter of a billion dollars on the bank.

"I have been doing a little arithmetic and have come to the conclusion that the new Ford car cost Ford workers at least fifty million in lost wages during the past year.....Mr Ford refuses to concede that he has made a mistake in bringing the car out so late....But no one asks about the toll in human lives. (17)

His next appointment was as Professor and Vice President of the Union Theological Seminary from which he retired in 1960. During his period there he married an English girl, Ursula Compton, who was the first woman to receive a first class honours degree in Theology at Oxford. She became one of his students, and then his wife. She was also a theologian of considerable consequence in her own right. In 1974, three years after Reinhold Niebuhr's death, Ursula Niebuhr edited a book entitled *Justice and Mercy*, which is a collection of his sermons and prayers. She did this, she said, because, although her husband's work had been very much in the field of social and political ethics, yet she wanted his prayers and sermons published, to show the religious context and reference of his social concern.

Throughout his life Niebuhr involved himself deeply in the social, political and economic questions of his day. He became increasingly influential and in large measure this can be attributed to the fact that his thinking was "organic" rather than "systematic". He was captive to no particular school of theology and indeed claimed to have no interest in the nicer points of pure theology. Rather he adapted his thinking to the

rapidly changing world scene. The "American Dream", the two world wars, the rise of communism and fascism, the post-war nuclear capability were all scenes to which Niebuhr applied a Christian ethic which was Christocentric, dialectic and based on his study of the Nature of Man. We shall see, later in the thesis, and in particular when we study his 'theological pilgrimage', how he became more deeply theological with time. His major theological, as opposed to social and political works, were comparatively late.

His book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* is an essay in political ethics informed by his developing realism as a theologian. In the 1930's he was to the left of Roosevelt's "New Deal", and in the 1940's and 1950's he was the spokesman for the more liberal wing of supporters of national Democratic administrations and candidates. He was vice-chairman of the Liberal Party of New York State. Beginning as a socialist he moved away from all doctrinaire approaches to public issues to an acceptance of a mixed economy with great emphasis on the responsibility of the Federal Government for social welfare. He was one of the founders of "Americans for Social Democratic Action" and was a leader for many years of the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, which with his changing attitude towards socialism came to be called the "Frontier Fellowship". He edited its journal, "Radical Religion" which was later to be called "Christianity and Society".

In his autobiographical introduction to Kegley's book, *Reinhold Niebuhr, his Religious, Social and Political Thought*, Niebuhr makes no claim to be a theologian. He saw himself primarily as defender of the Christian faith in a secular age. He declined to defend himself against the stricter sets of theologians in Europe who claimed that his interests were apologetic and practical rather than theological.

I have never been competent in the nicer points of pure theology; and I must confess that I have not been sufficiently interested heretofore to acquire the competence. (18)

ORTHODOXY AND LIBERALISM:

In this section of the chapter we shall look at the schools of theology which influenced Brunner and Niebuhr and attempt to discover where their sympathies lie.

Emil Brunner, contributing to Kegley's book, is very generous in his comments on Niebuhr, but on the question of Niebuhr's frequent disclaimer of his being a doctrinal systematiser, Brunner has this to say.

"Does one not have the right to expect of every thinking Christian - a *a fortiori* of every Christian thinker - that he be cognisant of what he has to hope for in Christ. To what extent there stands behind Niebuhr's 'eschatological symbols' a reality - and what kind of reality - or whether perhaps these eschatological symbols are merely 'regulative principles' in the Kantian sense - these are questions on which we should like to have him make a definitive pronouncement."

(19)

Commenting on the friendship that Brunner enjoyed with Niebuhr, Brunner challenges the label "neo-orthodoxy" which had been given to the American theologian. He says,

It is rather an unfortunate label, since in all the world there is nothing more unorthodox than the spiritual volcano Reinhold Niebuhr.

(20)

Brunner preferred the term "radical protestant", as a mark of a return to Reformation thinking and as a protest against the ruling thought-patterns of his age. It is true that Niebuhr himself disliked the term "neo-orthodoxy" when it was applied to himself. The truth is, as we have said, that he was difficult to classify into any particular school or movement. Neo-orthodoxy represented a recovery of the classical Christian heritage. In Niebuhr's case this meant giving special attention to such figures as the Hebrew prophets, Jesus and Paul, Augustine, the Protestant Reformers

and Kierkegaard - hence *orthodoxy* - but without the rigidity and exclusiveness and archaic world view that characterised much early Christianity - hence *neo*.

Niebuhr also reacted against any suggestion that he was a "liberal" - clearly a reference in his mind to nineteenth century religious liberalism, and yet his openness to change suggests liberalism at its best. Some of his polemics in theological terms were directed against Karl Barth, and in particular against Barth's rigid stance on revelation. The movement known as "dialectical theology" was known in America as Barthian theology. Brunner says of this that "Niebuhr has made out of the dialectical theology something quite new - something genuinely American".

Harnack is frequently regarded as one of the founders of the liberal school of theology on the Continent. Brunner came across him in Berlin, although, as we have seen, he was not greatly impressed by him. However Harnack has this to say as a definition of liberalism.

The Gospel did not come into the world as a statutory religion, and therefore none of the forms in which it assumed intellectual and social expression - not even the earliest - can be regarded as possessing a classical and permanent character. As Christianity rises above all antitheses of the Here and the Beyond - life and death - work and the shunning of the world - reason and ecstasy - Hebraism and Hellenism - it can also exist under the most diverse conditions, just as it was originally amid the wreck of the Jewish religion that it developed its power. Not only can it so exist - it must do so if it is to be the religion of the living, and is itself to live. (21)

We saw at the beginning of this chapter that Niebuhr considered the Reformers to be not dialectical enough. Perhaps the clearest example of a Niebuhrian dialectical position is the opening sentence of the second

volume of the Gifford Lectures, published as *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Niebuhr began the second set of lectures with this claim:

"Man is, and yet is not involved in the flux of nature and time."
(22)

On this statement a helpful commentary is provided by Robert McAfee Brown in an introduction to a selection of Niebuhr's essays and addresses: *The essential Reinhold Niebuhr*.

'Those who take the trouble to parse this statement theologically will discover that it makes perfectly good descriptive sense. We are involved in the flux of nature and time. We are born, we eat, we make love, we die. But it is also true that we are *not* involved in the flux and nature of time completely, for we transcend, in part at least, that very flux; we not only die but we know that we will die, we reflect on the fact, and we dread our own death. By the gifts of memory and anticipation we stand in some sense above our mortality and survey it. Birds and humans both sing, Niebuhr reflected, but birds do not write histories of bird music. That we stand at a unique juncture of nature and spirit, neither dimension of which can be collapsed into the other, is what distinguishes us from the rest of creation.' (23)

The combination of dialecticism and liberalism can be said to be a powerful force in twentieth-century Protestant theology, and it is a great credit to theology that the doctrines of Man, of God, of Justification, of sin and of grace among others could be communicated with integrity. These movements arose out of the nineteenth century critical Biblical studies. The most important work of Niebuhr's in the field of ethics is *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. His writings were prolific and he preached ceaselessly in America and Europe, and in that book we have proof that Niebuhr's reluctance to admit to the title "theologian" is, in fact, mis-placed. The book is in fact the record of the Gifford Lectures which he delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1939. In it he was concerned to prove that modern versions of man's nature and fate are at once very different from,

and yet very similar to, interpretations found in classical idealism, and that the Biblical view of man is superior to both classical and modern views. It is here that we see the pedigree of Niebuhr's thinking clearly. From the Bible, through St Paul, to Augustine and Luther, to its renewal in Twentieth Century America. His apparent lack of optimism in the nature of man was reinforced by his experience of Nazism and then Communism, "resting respectively upon the foundations of moral cynicism and moral utopianism". It is in this book, "The Nature and Destiny of Man", that we shall see just how important theology is in the field of ethics, and how "sin" and "grace" must be understood before a Christian answer emerges. Unlike Brunner, Niebuhr disclaims a knowledge of anthropology, and yet the book is anthropological in the same way as Brunner's *Man in Revolt*. Brunner's book appeared earlier, but shares with Niebuhr's the same view of man and his destiny.

ETHICS AND THEOLOGY:

So far, in this chapter, we have concentrated on biographical details, and on some of the various theological teachings that were contemporary with Brunner and Niebuhr. As we have seen, it is difficult to 'label' either of them accurately, but we have noted the principle influences that guided them. Here, we shall attempt to discover their reason for placing the subject of ethics within theology, rather than viewing ethics as a separate subject with theological connections. Here they have to answer critics from both the secular and the theological world. In the introductory autobiography in Kegley's *Reinhold Niebuhr, His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, Niebuhr answers his critics and the form and content of the answers form a basis for much of the content of this thesis. It is here that Niebuhr defends his theological stand against secularists, and also against those of Christian persuasion who hold to a more "Catholic" view of the debate and those on the "Protestant" side who would prefer a more traditional approach.

First, he answers those critics, both secular and Christian liberals who criticise him for his preoccupation with the Christian doctrine of Sin, and his alleged over-emphasis on the corruption of human nature. The very title

of Brunner's work *Man in Revolt* suggests that there is here a great deal of common ground between the two. Here we see how a Christian view of man differs from a humanistic view of man - and particularly from a view of man as seen in classical philosophy. Niebuhr sees the crux of the argument lying within the question of whether God is a person who wills and loves, or whether He is too abstract to be ascribed personality. Whilst recognising the danger of too anthropomorphic a view of God, it must be said that to liken God to some rational structure of existence or to an undifferentiated ground of being, is more dangerous. Parallel with this argument is the question of whether the unique nature of man lies within a definition of man's dignity, and with the proof of his virtue, or whether it lies within his capacity for radical freedom. Here we must set the freedom of man within the context of those events and conditions over which man has no control, and therefore the radical nature of man's freedom means that man can rise above the limits of nature, and that he is not bound in his actions to the norms and universalities of reason.

Still on this subject, Niebuhr defends the Genesis account of the Fall of man against its liberal critics, both Christian and secular. It is only the Biblical Christian account of man that sees evil as being at the centre of man's being, a fact which can be verified both by observation and introspection. The latter is particularly important since viewing man as a subject instead of an object, one sees a particular self, which does not match the idealists' view of man with its unanimously optimistic view of man's virtue - an object in nature which can be manipulated into socially approved norms. Within the Genesis story, the state of man is described within a dramatic-historical setting - and this gives a better account of the nobility and misery of man than that given by scientists and philosophers. Man can only be seen in such a dramatic historical setting because he cannot be coordinated into a form of coherence which precludes man's freedom and individuality. Therefore, even in the context of tyranny, it is not proper to equate a Biblical view of man with a humanistic view. Indeed, Communism, which ostensibly is devoted to the concept of the dignity of man, in fact manipulates man in a form of cynical utopianism.

Concerning the setting of Christian morality into a unique system, Niebuhr answers his secular critics who were shocked by an attack by a Christian leader on modern, liberal and secular society. Here he had to contend the sentimental view of man expressed in the "American Dream" which had been responded to by many Christians in the form of a "social Gospel". Many saw the Church as the chief support of a traditional society. This is linked with the danger of regarding religion as a means of making a people more biddable and more likely to respect authority. Whatever effect the French Enlightenment may have had on the idealists, these views must be severely questioned in the wake of two world wars and the threat of a nuclear holocaust. It is easy for a Christian to fall into the trap of conforming with a consensus, without seeing the value of the Gospel, with its power over sin. It is a matter of simple observance that whilst it is common for world leaders in the, so called, free world to pay lip service to religion, and to quote it to support their policies, one never hears them talk of The Cross, the Grace of God, the demonic power of sin, or any other of the definitive Christian perspectives. .

In arguing the case for ethics to be based in theology, and yet observing that ethical systems do exist which are not theological, or Christian, it is necessary to be aware of what comprises a liberal culture, and what theology can deduce from it. Modern culture has largely relegated religion, and dogmatic religion in particular, to the periphery of life and is outraged that it can be criticised by dogmatism - especially religious dogmatism. Both Brunner and Niebuhr see this. Brunner studied the rise of technology and suspected it. He saw that in a technological world men might indeed look for ethical standards - but ethical standards that are consistent with modern man's maturity as a scientific and empirical creature. In one of his Gifford lectures given at St Andrews University in 1948 he had this to say.

The crazy tempo of technical revolution can only be reduced to a degree which is socially and personally supportable, if the whole scale of values of European nations can be changed. As long as material values indisputably take the first place, no change for the better can be expected.

The perversion of the order of means and ends was caused by the decay of the consciousness of personality. And this in turn was the consequence of the decay of the Christian faith. In our time many have come to see, and are ready to admit, that moral values ought to be put in first place. This insight is good, but not sufficient. Mere ethics has never displayed real dynamic. You cannot cure a demon-ridden technical world with moral postulates. In contrast to mere ethics and morality, Christian faith has the dynamic of passion, of surrender and sacrifice. It is capable of turning man to the eternal end, of unmasking demonic sin and thereby banning it, which no enlightened education is capable of doing. (24)

This is a powerful passage, and one which puts the human dilemma in a proper context. Putting the same argument, although in the context of empiricism generally, and not technology in particular, Niebuhr reduces the faith of modern man to two related articles, the idea of progress and the idea of the perfectability of man. This is likened to Renaissance thinking, where operations of reason are relevant to the processes of nature. Niebuhr quotes the Renaissance pride in discovering that "Mathematics unlocks the mysteries of nature". Indeed, Niebuhr asserts that in the empirical process one may imagine that one is engaged in a purely scientific inquiry, but in fact it is guided by a faith - faith, that is, in progress and perfectability. This, he says, "is no less dogmatic for being implicit rather than explicit, and it is no more true for being arrayed in the panoply of science." (25) He further argues that the fact that Communists should adorn their more explicit dogma with the prestige of science provides modern liberal culture with a caricature of its own beliefs.

Theological, as opposed to secular, criticism of Niebuhr's and Brunner's position has been levelled by orthodox "Barthian" theologians on the basis that an analysis of the human situation was a tortuous way to return to faith, when faith is a mystery of grace, and there is no way of compelling faith rationally. In other words, what is the relationship between faith

and experience? To what extent must a moral theologian understand the working of man's mind in order to present God's will?

It would seem that the task of a Christian apologist is to show alternative faiths to be mistaken to the point where men say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life". This can only happen when theology has grasped the nature and the probability of the alternatives. This may lessen the chance of Christianity being labelled "obscurantist" - in the eyes of the scientist - and content to proclaim a Gospel of divine capriciousness. Undoubtedly, the scientist with his carefully thought out system of "causality" is likely to regard as unnecessary the whole question of mystery, eternity and salvation. Indeed the possibility of secular man delving into concepts such as "selfhood" and "the supernal" is diminished when he realises that the proponents of Christianity show a disdain for his preoccupations.

Part of the problem here is not only that no faith is rationally compelling, but also that the Christian faith distinguishes itself from other faiths by being more explicit - which could make it quite unacceptable to those schooled in a scientific ethos. This difficulty is not only experienced by scientists, but also by philosophers. Philosophy may well delve into the concept of mystery and even the supernal, but, almost by definition, it is an ontological enquiry. That it to say, it reaches to the mystery, whatever that may be, from the human mind outwards. The explicitness of the Christian faith is that it is "revealed" and not "discovered". This is in some ways a more serious dismissal than that of the scientist. Philosophies which emphasise ontological categories deny man his most important element - that is that he is a creature of history. His uneasy conscience is not an ontological fate - but a result of his historic egotism. In this same history Christianity discloses the nature of its Saviour. Ontologically it is absurd to say that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself". If ontology, summed up in the apologetic that "there is that than which nothing greater can exist", defines God in a series of absolutes, then to ascribe to him "personhood" is nonsense.

Further, Christian faith asserts that the bridging of the gap between man and God is a historical event. Again, this cannot be rationally defended, and one is left with the evidence of Christian experience and the new life that it gives. Liberal theology has made the mistake in reducing the absurdity, from an ontological viewpoint, of God being involved in history. The result is a gospel consisting of "eternal principles", such as the transcendent value of the individual, and the brotherhood of man in love. However the Bible record is that we love one another "because He first loved us" - a historical happening. This is much more positive than the "ethical truism" that it replaces, and it forms a starting point for a Christian ethic.

We are left with the view that man is a creature of history, and that he responds to events of history and that God reveals Himself in historical and dramatic events. The historical is not subject to the ordinary scientific tests of rationality. There is no pattern in history once one acknowledges the creative and unpredictable nature of man. Also an attempt to avoid "obscurantism" on the part of the Church in the matter of scientific discovery, should not result in a dissipating of principal Christian precepts. It may well be that the wise of our generation do not see the value of a non-rational faith contained in, and revealed in, history, and the Christian can take some comfort from the fact that the wise of Jesus' generation could not perceive the truth either.

To summarise this we could say that on the one hand the Church must confront the new school of "reason", based on empiricism, with informed sympathy and understanding. It should not be tempted to put up defences which make nonsense in a post-Darwin world to the extent that it attacks honorable scientists and philosophers. Neither should it compromise to the extent that it loses the essence of its message, which is bound in history and enacted in the world. Reluctant as modern man may be to enter into an encounter with God, yet this is what he must do before he can experience the faith and before he can begin to make ethical choices which are in any way distinctively Christian. The Church must always be prepared to own up to its shortcomings, and to recognise that from time to time men have used Christianity in an idolatrous manner, and have resorted to a kind of

fundamentalist fanaticism instead of facing up to the questions as honestly as some men of science have done.

Niebuhr has this to say.

Christianity is, in principle, a religion of the spirit rather than of law. We are warned to 'stand fast in the freedom with which Christ has set you free'. St Paul means that no meticulous obedience to specific moral standards can be a substitute for the self's encounter with God, in which the pretensions and the pride of the self are broken and it is set free of self and sin. (26)

In the preface to *The Divine Imperative* Brunner writes:

The question, 'What ought we to do?' is the entrance to the Christian faith. None can evade it who wish to enter the sanctuary. But it is also the gate through which one passes out of the sanctuary again, back into life. But the question has gained new meaning. No magic transformation has taken place within the sanctuary of faith; the human being who passes through those portals both on his way in and on his way out, is the same human being; erring, imperfect, weak. But something has happened to him within the sanctuary, which, although it has taken place in secret and is only partially visible to the eyes of the world, has made him a different person, something which has opened his eyes and his heart to a reality, which he never knew before: the reality of the living God.....There he stands as one who has been touched by God, whose heart has been pierced by Him, as one who has come under the stern judgement of God and has tasted the divine mercy, as one who can never seek the meaning of life and the answer to that great human question anywhere else save 'there'. There he stands, this weak human being, in the midst of life, among other people; but because he comes 'from thence', he is now in another position in life and it is this which makes him a Christian. What this means for the answering of that question constitutes the subject matter of Christian ethics. (27)

Niebuhr and Brunner have this much in common. They both believe in the essential experience of the Divine Human encounter. With all their enlightenment, their "liberalism", their dialectic priorities and their understanding of the nature of reason and also of the critical understanding of scripture, they both hold to the essential historical - dramatic events of faith. Ethics spring from the personal and individual encounters that take place between men and God. It is their task to pit this conviction not only against a cynical world of empiricists, but also against a Church which, in some areas, is authoritarian and which has inherited, along with the gospel, much luggage which belongs more properly to the Greeks who were contemporary with the New Testament. We shall see where they diverge, but on the important question: "Where does ethics belong?", they are of one mind, and this thesis will attempt to affirm that agreement and to show that it is the proper way for the church to deliver its ethical message.

- 1) Gordon Harland: *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* p177 OUP 1960
- 2) Kegley and Bretall ed. *The Theology of Emil Brunner* - article: "Some questions on Brunner's Epistemology." Paul Tillich
- 3) Kegley and Bretall ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr - His Religious, Social and Political Thought* - LLT p507
- 4) Reinhold Niebuhr: *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Vol 2 p204
- 5) Kegley and Bretall ed. *The Theology of Emil Brunner* p3 LLT
- 6) Ibid p4
- 7) Ibid p6
- 8) Ibid p 6
- 9) Ibid p 6
- 10) Ibid p 8
- 11) Ibid p 8
- 12) Ibid p 11
- 13) Ibid p 11
- 14) Richard Harries ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of our Time* p 1
- 15) Reinhold Niebuhr: *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* p9
- 16) Ibid p27
- 17) Ibid p123
- 18) Kegley and Bretall: p3
- 19) Ibid p86
- 20) Ibid p83
- 21) Adolph Von Harnack: quoted in *Liberal Protestantism* ed B. Reardon 1968 (Series: A Library of Modern Religious Thought" Ed H Chadwick
- 22) Reinhold Niebuhr: *The Nature and Destiny of Man.* vol 2
- 23) Robert MacAfee Brown: *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr* p17
- 24) Emil Brunner: *Christianity and Civilisation* Part 2 p15 (1948)
- 25) Kegley and Bretall p15

- 26) Ibid p22
- 27) Emil Brunner *The Divine Imperative.*

CHAPTER 2: NATURAL LAW

We saw at the beginning of this thesis that Niebuhr, in acknowledging his closeness to Brunner theologically, distanced himself from him in his treatment of the ethical problem on the basis that Brunner increasingly adopted the concept of Natural Law while he, Niebuhr, increasingly rejected the theory. (1). In this chapter we shall examine the concept of Natural Law, its history and the way in which both Brunner and Niebuhr treated it, as well as the way Brunner dealt with this particular criticism.

It is important at this stage to note that Natural Law theories inevitably involve an examination of the concepts of "natural" and "revealed" theology, and "general" and "special" revelation. However we shall attempt to deal with Natural Law theories specifically and discuss the other issues referred to in the next chapter. I shall argue here that both Brunner and Niebuhr reached similar conclusions, in that they regarded classical natural law theories as sub-Christian when used as a basis for ethics. At the same time, they rejected the theory that Christian ethics are wholly the product of the doctrines of Revelation and Justification by faith.

Natural Law can be described as a law which is universally and timelessly valid, seated within the nature of man. Those who hold to natural law theories would say that man has a capacity within his nature - that is to say within the fact that he is a man - to recognise that some acts are good and some are bad. The next step from that position is to identify from that natural discriminatory capacity, particular "good" acts, and particular "bad" acts. Thus a code is developed and is validated by philosophical means. In order for this to happen, man has to use that faculty which, Aristotle claimed, places man apart from the rest of creation - "reason". Whatever philosophical tools are used the result is a code, or a law, based on man's innate moral capacity and the application of reason to that capacity. Another point must be made, which is that natural law implies a universal and objective view of the universe in all its natural forms.

This a position which was widely held by the Stoics, and epitomised in the works of Aristotle. Indeed, Aristotle's *Ethics* are based on the supremacy of human reason.

Man is that living nature which possesses reason in its own right .
(2)

The rational nature of man is that which sets him apart and is that which forms the essence of man. In terms of ethics Aristotle singles out man as being unique in perceiving the nature of good and evil. Of virtue he says:

The virtues come to us neither by nature nor despite of nature. But we are furnished by nature with a capacity for receiving them, and are perfected in them by custom. Again, in whatever cases we get by nature, we get the faculties first and perform the acts of working afterwards (3)

Two other factors justify our examination of Natural Law, apart from the disagreement in the treatment of the subject between Niebuhr and Brunner. The first is an examination of the current popularity of Natural Law theories, and the second is the place that these theories have had in the formulating of Christian ethics in many parts of the church.

To deal with its popularity, Gordon Harland has this to say:

Our age is experiencing a renewed interest in Natural Law. This is due in part to the catastrophic events of our time and the inability of prevailing philosophies to provide adequate insight or resource to cope with the terrible realities of this era. There is a very great truth in the recognition that all our values are relative and historically and culturally conditioned, which we overlook at our peril. But if what we call right and wrong, good and evil, true and false are *only* the product of a particular culture, then we are left with no basis on which to resist Communism or Nazism with anything like an unqualified "No". Faced with the unheard of atrocities of the demonic movements of

our time, the question of whether the distinction between right and wrong has any basis in reality has become a most urgent intellectual and social question" (4)

A comment on this passage would include what Niebuhr had to say about empirical man being unlikely to delve into the concepts of the "supernal" (5). Modern man gives the appearance of being able to survive without "spirituality", but he has come to realise that society cannot survive without morality. He therefore looks to a source of authority which can explain moral standards and which can mark out the pitch within which human behaviour can be described as tolerable. The plea for a strong lead can seem irresistible, and sections of the Church fall into the trap of responding to it - validating natural morality with ecclesiastical authority, which has nothing to do with Christian ethics. The content of the Christian ethic is "love", and that content is the basis of all right decisions. Love is revealed supremely in Christ, and therefore the answer to a moral dilemma is "Christ crucified". This is a message that the world does not understand, any more than did the Jews and Greeks to whom Paul referred.

Natural Law, then, places the Church's ethical message in something of a dilemma. It is true that the message which the Church has is that which has been revealed by God to the Church for the benefit of the world. But the message is a "whole" message and the task of the Christian ethicist is to work out a way of translating "love", an inter-personal quality, into the questions which arise in various social and political structures.

The other factor which makes this examination important is the fact that natural law theories have been used extensively by sections of the Church in establishing a base for Christian ethics. Clearly these cannot be ignored, especially as Natural Law, when used as the basis of much Roman Catholic teaching has acted as the main point of dispute between Catholic and Protestant ethics. Vatican II has changed much of this, and we shall see later that the two sides have come much closer together.

AQUINAS

Aristoteleanism experienced a renaissance in the Middle Ages. By then Augustine had examined the concept of *imago dei* and had come to a more or less pessimistic view of the nature of man, redeemable only by Christ. He had seen that *imago dei* consists of man's relational being with God, rather than man's capacity for reason. The relationship between man and God, broken in "the Fall", could only be restored by faith in Christ. Thus he developed the Pauline doctrine of Justification by Faith. It was Augustine to whom the Reformers looked for their inspiration. However, in the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas seized on the Aristotelean formula and expounded a different doctrine. In terms of *imago dei* Aquinas asserted that at the Fall the "likeness" of God was taken away, but that the "image" remained intact. Man's reasoning is required to sustain the Image, but God's grace is needed to restore the likeness. Thus Aquinas does not dispense with the necessity of Grace, or the necessity of revelation, but his view of man is altogether more optimistic, and faith and reason must work hand in hand to establish the basis for Christian behaviour.

Aquinas set out to reconcile the two concepts of law and liberty, using "faith" to comprehend liberty, and "reason" to comprehend law. It was directly from Aristotle that he drew the twin concepts of free speculative thought and of conduct based on the principle of the fullest self expression.

The argument proceeds along these lines. Christian belief allows us to postulate a body of "natural law" which, whatever its immediate source, is of universal validity. It can either be implanted in, or made acceptable to, the normal human conscience. In spite of the variations in different cultures and generations, it is the case that - quite apart from the Christian revelation - the normal progress of human thought reduces all these variations to one more or less common standard. This general standard, common to all humans, including non-Christian communities, is commonly spoken of as the law of nature.

On this Aquinas says:

'Reason naturally apprehends as good all those things to which man has a natural inclination. Good (in this sense, of that for which we have a natural inclination) is to be sought for, evil avoided . (6)

Commenting on this passage, K.E.Kirk, an Anglo Catholic theologian writing earlier this century has this to say:

According to this rule, self preservation, the reproduction of the species, the care of offspring and so forth, stand first among the laws of nature. In the second place come those "laws" which man does not share with the animal creation - to know the truth about God, and hence to shun ignorance, to live in society and hence to avoid those among whom one lives. Natural Law, in fact, means simply the satisfaction, in harmony with one another, of the natural human instincts, as much on their intellectual side as on their physical sides. A modern psychologist could scarcely better this statement'. (7)

Aquinas recognised that just as the Christian consciousness could not be satisfied merely with the cardinal virtues alone, so it could not be satisfied with this summary of Natural Law as being all that a Christian conscience is required to recognise.

'Natural Law is completed in Divine Law. (8) 'The essence of the Divine Law is first of all that it is of internal conditions rather than of external acts, and secondly that it is the main *lex non scripta*' (9)

The essence is grounded in God and in the Divine wisdom. The Gospel precepts, for example the Beatitudes and the Decalogue, in their New Testament form are part of this new law, which is in essence a law of liberty. The ideal Christian then, is the one who, while fully possessed of the principles of morality, need never call them to mind. His actions would spontaneously correspond with the Christian ideal.

To show the amount of support which this teaching receives, we can cite Kirk in his appraisal of these passages.

'It is in passages such as this that Thomas Aquinas shows himself to fall short neither of the thought of the New Testament nor of the highest Christian experience'. (10)

Aquinas had a pragmatic approach to the problem of ethical foundations, based on his skills as both a philosopher and a theologian. The Law of Nature, just like the imperfect revelation of the Old Testament, enjoins certain outward acts. These are first and foremost acts which lead to the receiving and maintaining of spiritual grace - the Eucharist, prayer, confession, absolution and so on. Grace is sacramentally infused. Natural Law is authoritative over the conscience, both in the complex of useful actions that benefit society, and also in the actions which increase the possibility of a life being more subject to the Holy Spirit.

Further, Aquinas used the Aristotelean concept of "essences" to substantiate his theories. "Essence" is to be distinguished from "existence". Just as there is a difference between matter and form, so there is a difference between essence and existence. And yet essence and existence are present in the same finite being. The existence of something arises from the fact that there is an essence of it. The Essence "is that which is signified by the definition of a thing". (11). In the case of material things, "the word 'essence' signifies that which is composed of matter and form". (12)

Existence, on the other hand, is the act by which an essence or substance is or has being. Aquinas says that existence denotes a certain act, for a thing is said not to exist by the fact that it is in potentiality but by the fact that it is in an act. Thus there is "in essence" natural morality, and there are in "existence" moral acts. Human reason is applied to the "essence" of morality to produce the moral act. One is form and the other is matter. One is potential and the other is act. The act cannot take place without the essence. The act is a revelation of the essence and the essence has no manifestation without the act. The essence is unchanging and static. Man can perceive and observe the act, and can use reason and intellect to grasp the essence. It is central to Thomism that the "essence" is unchanging, embracing both what something is, and what it

ought to become. This gives rise to an attractive body of moral certainties and formed a major part of Catholic moral philosophy for a long time.

Commenting on Aquinas' theory, N.H.G. Robinson has this to say.

In St Thomas there is to be found an impressive re-affirmation of the integrity of morality within the larger context of the Christian religion, although it is marked by the naturalism which also pervaded Greek thought . (13)

Robinson continues to subject the Thomist theory to a consideration of the validity of different moral judgements on the same subjects in different cultures and at different periods. The concept of a static essence ignores the reality of history in determining different moral solutions. He claims that Thomism is an over-simplification of the problem.

Thus the medieval theory in thinking of natural morality as a corpus of laws is guilty of over-simplification in two directions. It misses the elusive unity that is characteristic of a moral code, and it fails to understand the complex relationship between one moral code and another. If, however, its mechanical method of "addition" is inadequate to the sphere of natural morality, it is no less inadequate - to say the least - to the sphere of total morality. To represent the moral component of the Christian revelation and the Christian religion as simply added to natural morality, divine law to natural law, is to mis-represent the real situation in not one way but in several (14)

It seems that Robinson is arguing that the mis-representation really consists of over-simplification of the issues. Thomism has survived not only in the Roman Catholic Church, but also in parts of the Anglican Church. In view of man's trust in the power of 'reason', Aquinas has obvious attractions.

In considering both Brunner and Niebuhr, in their rejecting of Catholic teaching and of Thomism, it must be pointed out, in fairness to the

Catholic position that they wrote before the propositions of Vatican II, (1962-1965).

At this point we should make a note of some of the reforms which have come about in Catholic moral philosophy in recent years, not that these make Brunner and Niebuhr's position invalid, but to show that the Catholic Church has moved considerably in their direction. Before Vatican 2, the Catholic church had become increasingly authoritarian, a position which was very influential in early twentieth century terms, and justified much of the European polemic against it. The increased authoritarianism coincided with the loss of the Papal States and the emergence of the Italian Republic in the middle to later nineteenth century. Pope Pius IX (1846 - 1878) retaliated with a strong emphasis on papal authority in the sphere of church dogma, and his successor, Leo XIII (1878-1902) fought vigorously for the catholic guardianship of the world, in the face of the dangers, as he perceived them, of the rise of continental socialism and democracy. In 1891, he published *Rerum Novarum*, in which he claimed that the welfare of the oppressed working classes could only be safe-guarded by the Catholic Church and its interpretation of Natural Law. He decreed that only Thomism could be taught in Catholic seminaries. Authoritarianism, which was historically associated with Natural Law, assumed more influence than the genuine attempts by the Catholic Church at social reform, and this can be seen by the enthusiasm on the part of Pius XI (1922-1939) for the traditional concordats of church and state and by the manner in which, for example, he supported Franco in the Spanish Civil War. The attitude of the Catholic Church to the rise of fascism was therefore somewhat ambiguous.

Vatican II marked a radical departure. The Catholic theologians of Vatican II responded very positively to the criticisms of traditional natural law theories. The era of enforced Thomism was over. Catholic theologians such as Charles Curran and Timothy E. O'Connell recognised the need for a pluralism of philosophical approaches in man's quest for a better understanding of man and his reality. They recognised the misleading influence of Aristotle and the Stoic call for a rational man to fit in with a rational universe. O'Connell wrote of the "central openness of ourselves and the world". Reality is changing, evolving and historic. It was

inevitable that the Catholic Church should have to revise its traditional views in the light of contemporary culture and philosophical concepts. In this it was indebted to Catholic writers such as Jacques Maritain and Heinrich Rommen who had dealt with natural law and the philosophy of religion in terms which more closely reflected mainstream thinking in European and western philosophy.

Within the Catholic Church, natural law theories, though not totally rejected, have been radically changed. Natural law is seen more as a "project" than as an absolute. Although it would be naive to assume that Vatican 2 could transform everything, the importance of natural law in the moral debate has been diminished somewhat. It has certainly not, however, been eliminated.

Natural Law combined the appeal to reason with an understanding of revelation and grace. Its biggest danger was that when reason is used for any understanding of the nature of man, inevitably a law, or a code, emerges. However free the human conscience may appear in its redeemed state, inevitably the code becomes an essential part of the institution which promotes it, and a church emerges which is authoritarian and binding. This is exactly the polemic which Paul waged and which Jesus himself waged in his dealings with the Pharisees.

BRUNNER'S CRITICISMS OF NATURAL LAW

On the two points of authority - a necessary companion of law - and conscience, Brunner has this to say.

We have heard much of a "demand for ethics". If by this is meant that it is necessary for Christendom to be continually considering this question, and a sign of poverty and bewilderment if it can give no clear answer to it, then that "demand" is only too plainly justified; for no clear answer has been given for a long time. But this demand may be - like the cry for a strong man - merely an expression of shrinking from a responsibility, which desires an authoritative

promulgation of a law which will settle all difficulties once for all, which will lay down beforehand what everyone has to do or leave undone; the demand for the doctrinal authority - binding on the conscience - of the Roman Catholic Church. (15)

Brunner argues that the infallible criterion of a protestant ethic is this: Does it claim to give *that* answer, or does it refuse to. By this, Brunner means that the answer to the demand for ethics should not consist of a collection of certainties which are reinforced by authority. If 'the demand for ethics' means a demand for an answer to every ethical question which settles all ethical difficulties, then a Protestant ethic is one that is born out of a refusal to answer the question in that way.

On the subject of the conscience Brunner is equally adamant. He does not see it as that which has to be eased and quietened by the infusion of grace in a gradual and sacramental way, nor as that to which the power of reason and rationalising should be applied.

Conscience is not 'the voice of God', as it used to be described in the Theology of the Enlightenment, and as it has since been regarded by popular natural theology.....For the sinister thing about conscience is that primarily it has nothing to do with God at all. That it attacks men like an alien, dark, hostile power, as it has been represented in ancient myths and by the great poets of ancient and modern times - who in this respect are so much wiser than the philosophers. (16)

Brunner describes conscience as that which makes man feel alienated, that things are out of order, that he is disturbed and injured. But conscience does not tell a man from whom he is alienated. Conscience is the realisation of shortcomings in relation to the upholding of a law. Legalism and conscience go hand in hand.

Conscience does not face sin as though it were that part of a man which has remained sound, but it is itself deeply involved in sin. Indeed, it is that which most separates man from God, which drives man most of all in his loneliness away from God. (17)

Here the divide is very clear. The Protestant ethic dispenses with classical theories of Natural Law, and also dispenses with conscience as the criterion by which the effectiveness of Natural Law is measured.

Much of Brunner's writings about natural law consist of his criticism of the Catholic Church's failure to recognise the existence of "relative" as opposed to "absolute" natural law. We shall deal with the question of 'relativism' and 'absolutism' in more detail when we examine Brunner's writings about natural and revealed theology, and about 'special' and 'general' revelation.

Vatican II has to some extent dealt with that criticism. But it is here that Brunner notes that Aquinas went back to Aristotle and not to Augustine in his search for a doctrine of natural law. Therefore much official Catholic teaching has been pure Aristoteleanism, whereas the main influence on the reformers was Augustine, whose natural law theories were so much more flexible. In this he cites Luther, who used the doctrine of natural law, but not as a law or a principle. On the contrary, Brunner says, Luther was fully aware that from the point of view of actual history it is irrational in character.

This same passage constitutes a defence of Brunner's position in the face of Niebuhr's criticism that he leant too heavily on the Lutheran teaching about natural orders. Thus he argues that existing forms of society, especially the state and the family, are divine institutions, but in their concrete forms are products of a rational process which means that they share both in the sinfulness of the world and in the Divine will. According to Luther, natural law is concerned in so far as emphasis is laid on the fact that the knowledge of the immanent legalism within these concrete spheres is predominantly a matter of reason, and is only indirectly concerned with faith.

'What God requires for the ordering of society cannot be rationally deduced from a rational system, but it can only be discovered on each particular occasion, in obedience to the revealed will of God, by means of the reason (18)

It is this subjection of reason to revelation that makes traditional theories of natural law untenable. Indeed it must be argued that, for a Christian, any binding law which depends on human reason for its validity, is a contradiction in terms. Brunner argues that the Christian must seek the will of God in each situation, knowing that God will reveal his will to those who seek it. This is the unique position of the Christian, that he is subject to the overriding purposes of God which will be revealed to him as part of the process of redemption.

If Brunner writes like this we shall need now to discuss the substance of Niebuhr's accusation, and Brunner's defence on this subject.

NATURAL LAW AND NATURAL ORDERS.

The clue to the disagreement between Niebuhr and Brunner on the question of Natural Law lies in the German title of Brunner's *The Divine Imperative*. The German title *Das Gebot and die Ordnungen* expresses the two ideas of "command" and "orders". Thus Brunner makes a defence of himself against this particular criticism.

"The commandment (of God) stands above the orders of creation, and on the other hand these are to be understood as pointing only to the commandment of the moment . (19)

Brunner uses the term "orders" in the way it was used by Augustine and Luther. The word which Luther used and which Brunner adopted was "*Schöpfungsordnung*". This variously translated as "order of creation", "created order", "natural order". In expounding this concept, Brunner consistently places "order" beneath "command". The three propositions that are put forward to head up his chapters on "orders", all make the point of stressing the Divine initiative. This can be seen by examining his chapter headings.

'God gives us our calling, and *requires* from us the fulfilment of the duties of our calling. (20)

As Creator, God requires us to recognise and adjust ourselves to the orders he has created, as our first duty; as redeemer, as our second duty. He bids us ignore the existing orders, and inaugurate a new line of action in view of the coming of God.' (21)

'The divine command is only perceived if we take account of its threefold law; the laws of official duty, by which external community is maintained; the absolute law by which we recognise the lack of community; the law of love, whose function is to instruct the believer in his right personal relationship with his neighbour.' (22)

This proposition is justified by saying that God the Redeemer is the same as God the Creator, but that his works in the two capacities differ. As Redeemer He can only work where His word is heard, that is, in faith. As Creator and Preserver He works even where men do not know Him at all. Brunner points out that the Order in Creation works in sub-human life, and he quotes the "lilies of the field which He clothes so gloriously, and the fowls of the air whom He feeds". Similarly the orders work in man and are fulfilled in man, in a biological sense, unconsciously and involuntarily. But he says:

The ultimate, real meaning of the Orders can only be perceived where God is recognised as Creator and Redeemer, in faith, through His Word. But the Orders themselves are the subject of a purely rational knowledge. Even the most primitive heathen knows something of these orders. . (23)

From this point Brunner points out that the concept of "orders" permeates the whole of life, and that it is impossible to contemplate the wedded state, the family, civilisation and culture, in the nation and in the state, and finally in the Church without these being supported by orders of the most varied kind. In this, Brunner is closely following Luther, who saw a continuing order starting with the family, the community, the state and finally government as part of the same creative process.

Lest it be thought that the distinction between Natural Law and Natural Orders is somewhat semantic, we must repeat that Brunner firmly believed in the concept of "Command" as the priority, and that the "command" is a personal one arising from a Divine human encounter.

With much of this Niebuhr agrees. His main point of disagreement is that he feels Brunner has not taken sufficient account of history in both its liberating and corrupting sense, and also that he feels the Reformation rather too slavishly regarded the State as being "ordained" of God, and failed to give the subject of the "order of the state" sufficiently dialectic attention. Created order must be seen in the context of human history. Thus he says with regard to Brunner's examination of the "orders of creation":

"In all this one follows Brunner's exposition gratefully for he has given us many fresh insights into the intricacies of community life and the life of the Christian by applying Reformation principles to modern problems . (24)

Niebuhr concedes that the concept of orders reminds us that all is corrupted by sin and that there is no sample of the original purity. Both firmly reject Thomistic interpretations of *imago dei*, and therefore the most classical concepts of Natural Law. But on the same subject Niebuhr continues:

It is difficult to find this normative principle because man is a historical creature, and there are no purely "natural" forms in his life which have not been subject to both the freedom and the corruption of history . (25)

At this point, when we show examples of the use of the concept of "orders", it is important that we do not look too closely at the issues themselves - but only at their participation in the "orders" concept.

As an example of an order in Creation, Brunner cites marriage, and, in particular, monogamy. The intention within a marriage is indissolubility.

The natural evidences for that consist of the, roughly, equal numbers of males and females in the population, and the fact that each child that is born is the result of a union between a man and a woman. To make the "order" effective it needs love. On this, both "natural order" and "natural law" theories agree, although Brunner says that from the point of view of the Divine order of creation, we can see marriage as an ideal - which may in fact never correspond with reality. True, marriage is a primordial and perennially valid human community, validated by scripture and falling within a natural order. But even scripture allows for divorce "for the hardness of your heart", and Brunner acknowledges that there are occasions when a divorce is ethically more in line with natural order than a marriage, for example, without love.

At this point Niebuhr questions the whole concept of natural order.

‘It is just in this ideal example of the natural order (in which, incidentally, Catholic Natural Law and the Reformation concepts of the natural order agree) that prompts some questions about the validity of the concept. Undoubtedly every Christian would agree that the indissolubility of the marriage bond is the ideal solution for the actual intimate mergence of two lives, spiritually and physically. But this mergence is not a fact of nature, but an achievement of history, and is tolerable only when grace sustains the partnership....If we move from the problem of the indissolubility of marriage we find that everything is touched by history and is relativised by historical circumstances. (26)

We can see how a pattern is emerging in which Niebuhr is the pragmatist and the one most aware of history, while Brunner is still firmly in a Reformation frame of mind. Both acknowledge the supremacy of grace in these situations, but Niebuhr is suspicious that the line between natural law and natural order is too thin. Both concepts contain an immutability which has not taken account of historical development. Both leave little space for truly dialectic thought which, Niebuhr insists, is the hall-mark of Reformation re-thinking.

It may be that here there is a degree of mis-understanding between the two. Brunner, as we shall see, insists that historical situations make the concept of a rigid law unacceptable. When we come, later in the thesis, to examine the particular emphases of both writers, we may see that the effect of history on Brunner was different from the effect of history on Niebuhr. Brunner was a product of a long and consistent history of Lutheran development, whereas Niebuhr was something of a pioneer, in his own country, when it came to a vigorous exposition of protestant theology.

Brunner makes a specific defence of this accusation which is worth seeing.

'I have always thought that Niebuhr's identification of my social ethics with the Roman Catholic doctrine of Natural Law was a false interpretation of my intentions. In The Divine Imperative and, more strongly, in Justice and the Social Order I have always emphasised that the orders of creation are always to be discerned anew from the historical situation, and therefore may never be considered as rigid law. They are a revolutionary as well as a conservative principle".
(27)

Here Brunner is distancing the orders from law. It is open to question to what extent history has the power to change order, or whether history is itself a more important force than order. It would be difficult to deny that there is an order of creation, and although it may be inadequate to apply to it the philosophical tools that can produce a Christian ethic, yet at the same time to produce a Christian ethic without reference to God, the Creator, would leave us with a system of ethics which is capricious and open to the corrupting forces, as well as the liberating forces of historical events. It is here that Niebuhr needs to argue even more strongly for a dialectical base, and disagreeing with Brunner on this particular issue leaves him open to the charge of one-sidedness in his view of "order versus history."

On the question of marriage which we have just examined, Brunner does not produce a "hard line" conclusion even with his references to the natural order contained within marriage. He cites Mark 10:2-12 as an example of

the derivation of the sex relationship from the given facts of creation, and therefore its elevation to a normative ethical principle.

Not out of *agape* but out of this material principle is monogamy established as the idea of marriage, but this may not be interpreted, as do Roman Catholic ethicists, as law. Jesus does not mean to say that marriage is legally undivorceable. His words give an explanation of the essence of marriage based on the will of the creator, and they are therefore not to be understood as law. (28)

We have already noted that the particular genius of a Protestant ethicist is to translate theological concepts into social and political structures. It is because that is the purpose of ethics that the question of natural law, natural order and historical influences is a vital question to resolve.

It is here that Niebuhr criticises the Lutheran tradition of applying natural order to every form of community. Luther saw authority as expanding from that of parent, to family, to clan, to nation. But, Niebuhr contends, the authority of government should not be derived from the authority of parent.

The chief and the king have historically elaborated forms of power and authority and John Locke was quite right in challenging the idea that Government had an inherent authority on the basis of natural order. (29)

Brunner, on the other hand, follows the Reformation idea that the State has a negative function of preventing anarchy. He sees the Christian's place in a state as a "calling", and his question is not "How shall I alter it?", but, "How can I serve in it?" The question arises, therefore, whether Brunner's formulation of ethics opens him to the accusation of complacency in the face of tyranny. Niebuhr comments on this that we should see anarchy and tyranny as the "Scylla and Charybdis" between which mankind must steer towards justice, fearing the one evil as much as the other.

Niebuhr considers the attitude of Luther, and by implication, Brunner to the *status quo* as "slavish".

Here we can see something of the national differences between the two. Brunner was a thorough-going "Old" European Lutheran. Switzerland provided for him the most stable and traditional of European values. The progress of the medievalism of Luther and the Reformers had been gradual, and Brunner was able to adapt Luther's thinking to his own milieu, and, indeed, to regard it as essential in opposing the twentieth century rise of fascism and communism. Niebuhr, on the other hand could not escape the biographical-historical fact that he was at the same time a thoroughly North American citizen and thoroughly a child of the Protestant reformation. There was a conflict implicit in this situation, augmented by the fact of a war with the fatherland. Luther's theology of the nature of man, his sinfulness and the "fall" did not attract much sympathy in the "brave new world", and Niebuhr was therefore something of a rarity in his expounding of this theology in the midst of the "Great American Dream". He saw himself as one who has apprehended the essence of the European-made tradition, without in the process imbibing its historical *accidens*. His ethics consist of a constant dialogue with the American assumptions, and his personal history gave him a wholly different perspective from that of his European contemporaries.

In the context of the application of the concept of natural order to the idea of the state, Niebuhr and Brunner diverge as far as they do on any subject. Niebuhr dismisses the idea as, at best, minimal.

'It establishes the foundation as the law of love furnishes the pinnacle for the moral life. Between the minimum and the maximum, we must reach the hazardous and relative standards of justice which must be more flexible than Catholic Natural Law theories allow and it must have more body in its conceptions of justice than the Reformation theory permits. (30)

Brunner does not see justice in such an elevated way. Rather, it is an imperfect quality and never a final principle.

From the point of view of the Christian faith no idea of perfect justice can be conceived. For in its very nature, justice is imperfect. Only those whose minds are not aware of love can speak of justice as ultimate.....It is qualified by two concepts; by the sovereignty of God, which also stands above his law, and by the love of God which administers His law, and at the same time overcomes it. (31)

To summarise the dispute we can say that Brunner distances the concept of natural order from the Catholic doctrine of Natural Law. He places them firmly under the command of God. It is a very "theocentric" concept of the ethical question, and leaves room for rational thought within each situation. Niebuhr places more emphasis on the flexible nature of history which tempers the power of natural order.

THE CASE AGAINST NATURAL LAW THEORIES.

Both Niebuhr and Brunner agree that if Natural Law theories are made up of timelessly valid ethical demands, then this has to be opposed. This is inseparably bound up with the Thomistic and Aristotelean system, and foreign to a New Testament orientated thinker. In spite of their differences, the two writers are in broad agreement, although they deal with the subject in different ways. In Niebuhr's case, much of his writing is a polemic against systems and theories which differ from his conception of "love" as the ultimate law and norm. In an attempt to correct these various theories there is a danger that he may over-correct. One therefore has to examine his polemic against one theory and compare it with his views on a contrasting theory in order to discover his essential position. It is here that the dialectical structure of his thought is helpful.

An example of this is his polemic against the Catholic position on morality. In stressing the need to argue for the case of the "law of love", he finds that the Catholic moralists tend to absolutise aspects of medieval culture in their interpretations of natural law. He believes that they are too rigid in their application of the natural law to the endless complexities of social life. However, in his polemic against the Catholic

position, he draws back from dispensing entirely with natural law, or, at least, natural morality. The concepts of absolutism and relativism come into play, and he is left with the task of applying the "law of love" to these same complexities of social life. Thus he says:

There must be some way of resolving the debate between legalists and relativists which will refute the legalists whenever they make too sweeping claims for fixed standards of conduct and which will, at the same time, avoid an abyss of nihilism on the edge of moral relativism.
(32)

He wages a polemic against sections of the Protestant movement, and in particular against Karl Barth, which compels him to accept that there is a limited truth in the natural law concept. He concedes that there is a "permanent structure of human personality", (33) and that there are moral principles which are known apart from revelation. Thus he writes:

Karl Barth's belief that the moral life of a man would possess no valid principles of guidance if the Ten Commandments had not introduced such principles by revelation is as absurd as it is unscriptural. (34)

To support this assertion Niebuhr quotes Romans 2:14; "For when the gentiles which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law are a law unto themselves." Niebuhr is attacking Barth's exegesis in his commentary "Epistle to the Romans", the major commentary referred to earlier. This is but one example of the complexities of Niebuhr's thinking on this subject. It has the merit of opening one to the alternatives, and of highlighting his conviction in the transcendent freedom of man and the infinite flux of history. This polemical method is used throughout his treatment of the subject. He applies his arguments against Natural Law theories to his concept of justice, a polemic which is not only directed against Karl Barth, as we have seen, but also against Marxism, Catholicism and "enlightenment" theories.

Of Marxism he says:

Marxist theory as usual detects the taint of interest in theories other than its own. But it also has the equivalent of a "natural law". In that law the dominance of the ideal of equality is, for instance, clearly "ideological". It is informed by a justified resentment of the poor against inequality, but it fails to recognise the inevitability of functional inequalities in society". (35)

It is the pretended finality of natural law to which Niebuhr objects most strongly. This is not merely because of its lack of space for human freedom and the application of love which has to be seen in a non-legal way, but also because it raises ideology to a degree of pretension which he sees as an illustration in history of the way in which the force of sin lays claim to sinlessness. If natural law is final and timeless in its application, then one would need to question the need for redemption. Salvation could be acquired by a more rigorous insistence on the demands of natural morality. He makes a few concessions to the catholic position when he compares it with Marxism, but his criticism is essentially the same.

Catholic theories of natural law are no less pretentious than secular theories, even though they subordinate the virtue of justice, enjoined in the natural law, to the virtue of love, achieved by grace. According to the Catholic theory natural law is part of the "divine" or the "eternal" law which is manifested in human reason. The endless relativities of historical rational perspectives are obscured. This uncomfortable claim for an essentially universal reason is the basis for the remarkable degree of certainty with which Catholic moral theology is able to define justice and injustice in every possible situation. (36)

In this, Brunner would wholeheartedly agree, and his polemic against the catholic tradition is based on the same argument. (See note 11 in this chapter)

There is a degree of approval of the Marxist analysis in that Niebuhr agrees that the pretended purity of laws and concepts of justice owe as much to the power of the dominant elements in society which enforced these laws, as to the purity of natural law itself. It is no coincidence that the height of natural law teaching by the Catholic church in the middle ages coincided with its considerable temporal as well as spiritual power.

He says:

The requirements of natural law in the medieval period were obviously conceived in a feudal society; just as the supposed absolute and "self evident" demands of eighteenth century natural law were bourgeois in origin. (37)

Having suggested in this section that Niebuhr did not entirely dispense with natural law we need to look into this particular chink and see what theories would more radically dispose of it and in what way Niebuhr retains an element of it. As late as 1967 Niebuhr published "Christian realism and Political Problems", and an essay in that, entitled "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism", deals with the issue comprehensively. This issue is important in theology in view of the particular moral issues of our generation. There is a tendency for theology to centre, in its search for an a moral answer, on one of three positions. Either it can depend entirely on the existential moment, aware of what Niebuhr calls the flux of history, or it can centre exclusively on the doctrine of Justification by Faith, or again it can strengthen the implications of traditional natural law theories. An answer is needed to this dilemma and the Church needs to be clear in its understanding of its ethical base. If we discount the two latter positions, which for the sake of identity we can call respectively "Barthian" and "Catholic", we are left with the existential perspective.

In as much as it is fair to describe Niebuhr as a theistic existentialist, it will easily be seen that in comparison with a thorough-going atheistic existentialist such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Niebuhr is an essentialist in his view of the nature of man. Sartre points out that in theism "The individual man is the realisation of a certain concept in the divine

intelligence". (38) This is a result of the doctrine of creation. The theory of natural law has been built into this as man is seen as possessing an "essence", and that this "essence" in man is also implied in God's purpose for His creatures in their final redemption in Christ. Man, if viewed as a creature of God, or as a redeemed creature in Christ, has an essential nature. It is this "essentialist" view of man which has given rise to theories of natural law even in cases where there is no admitted theism, an example of which has already been provided in Niebuhr's comments on Marxism. Indeed it is a western tradition to ascribe to man an "essential" nature.

Compared with this, Sartre suggests that man has no essential nature. There is nothing behind him, or before him, which makes him this or that kind of person. Man is merely what he chooses to make himself. "*Opto ergo sum*". For Sartre there is no explaining of man's nature by reference to a fixed and given human nature. There is no pre-existent value or essence or structure of reality, or God, which justifies choice in an ethical sense. Man is totally free, and is in no sense "essential". Rather, he is totally "existential". Whether or not the idea of freedom as explained by Sartre constitutes the beginning, if not the end, of an "essence" within man, it has to be said that he has emptied nearly everything out of the traditional descriptions of the nature of man, from the Stoics to the neo-orthodox theologians of our generation.

Niebuhr's contribution is by comparison positively "essentialist", and his genius is that he uses the law of love as the ultimate sanction and is thoroughly aware of the indeterminate and infinite changes brought about by individual circumstances. Self-transcendent freedom forms part of the "essential" nature of man, and serves as a rigorously revised basis on which to build natural law theories. We have seen how his polemic is directed towards many opposing theories. The task that he set himself is to prove all alternative theories wrong, so that the nature of man can be discovered which will satisfy New Testament and Reformation ideas. To sum this up, we can say that if we regard man as a created being, and a potentially redeemable being, then natural law inevitably exists - but not in the timeless and invariable way in which it has been widely taught.

We saw earlier that there has been an emphasis, on the part of Brunner, on the Lutheran concepts of the "Orders of Creation", and an emphasis on the part of Niebuhr on the influence of history and the infinite changes which it brings about. History is seen as both corrupting and liberating. However, the difference between them is very much one of emphasis rather than principle. Brunner fully recognised the influence of history in negating the claims of natural law theories to have timeless and unvarying value. Making a distinction between "absolute" and "relative" theories of natural law, he has this to say about "absolute" theories.

This conceals secret tensions. On the one hand, its applicability depends upon the fact that its content is not only universally valid but that it can be universally perceived, and is to be affirmed by every rational being. History, however, shows that this is not the case at all. Quite reasonable people (and nations and periods) have regarded as "good" things which are totally different from each other, and do so still at the present day. Here we see the original fiction of Aristoteleanist anthropology; the doctrine of a universal reason. In theological language it means that the failure to recognise the fact that, through sin, even the original rational nature of man has been altered, and has been affected by the contradiction, (Romans 1:21) is suppressed. (39)

Brunner agrees with Niebuhr that the supreme Christian standard is love, which is not a law. Therefore every law is relative and not absolute. If the supreme and the ultimate is Divine Love, which cannot be conceived legally, then justice must be seen as relative to it. It is not absolute. Whatever may give evidence for the love of God, or whatever may reflect it, it is relative to it. This is not to say that law and justice are meaningless, but that if the absolute law is the same as love, which is not a law at all, then no concept lower than love - which means all concepts - can be fixed in any absolute law, or in any absolute "Natural Law".

Brunner further argues that an insistence on the concept of absolute natural law ignores history.

'It was only too evident that absolute natural law, with its abstractly egalitarian content, could be applied to historical reality, and that, if it were applied, inevitably its effect would be in the highest degree destructive and unjust.'" (40)

To summarise, both Niebuhr and Brunner agree that traditional doctrines of a universally and timelessly valid Natural Law are sub-Christian, in the sense that they do not start at the beginning of the question. The question must be based on an awareness of sin, an experience of redemption and a reception of the Divine will. It is an essential part of Reformation teaching that man stands before God as an individual, and that God will reveal His will to man as an individual. Whatever natural orders there may be, based on the truth that God is the creator of all things, and whatever natural law there may be, it is merely relative to the law of love, and carries none of the authority of the decision made by the Christian in response to God's love.

From here, we shall look into the relation of natural morality to general revelation, bearing in mind their rejection of Natural Law in its classical form.

- 1 Above: Ch1 p1
- 2 Aristotle: *De Anima*
- 3 Aristotle: *Ethics* Book 2. Trans D P Chase 1911
- 4 Gordon Harland: *The thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* p 29
- 5 Above: Ch1 p 14
- 6 Aquinas *Summa Theologica* i 2q 94 q2
- 7 K E Kirk *Some Principles of Moral Theology* p 182 (1926)
- 8 *Summa* i 2 9 91 2 4
- 9 *ibid*
- 10 K E Kirk *op cit* p 183
- 11 *De Ente et essentia*
- 12 *ibid*
- 13 N H G Robinson *The Groundwork of Christian Ethics.* p 125
- 14 *ibid* p 127
- 15 Emil Brunner *The Divine Imperative* p 9
- 16 *ibid* p 208
- 17 *ibid* p 157
- 18 *ibid* p 632
- 19 Kegley and Bretall (eds) *The Theology of Emil Brunner* p 350
- 20 Emil Brunner *The Divine Imperative* p 198
- 21 *ibid* p 208
- 22 *ibid* p 220
- 23 Kegley and Bretall *op cit* p 266
- 24 *ibid* p 266
- 25 *ibid* p 266
- 26 *ibid* p 267
- 27 *ibid* p 350

- 28 *ibid* p 350
- 29 *ibid* p 266
- 30 *ibid* p 267
- 31 Emil Brunner *The Divine Imperative* p 451
- 32 Reinhold Niebuhr *Faith and History* p 173
- 33 *ibid* p 180
- 34 Reinhold Niebuhr *The Nature and Destiny of Man* p 263
- 35 *ibid* p 262
- 36 *ibid* p 263
- 37 *ibid* p 262
- 38 Sartre *Existentialism* (1947) p 15
- 39 Emil Brunner *The Divine Imperative* p 631
- 40 *ibid* p 270

CHAPTER 3 LOVE, LAW AND REVELATION.

The debate on the classical theories of Natural Law which Niebuhr and Brunner held may well represent the extent of their disagreement with one another. However they dealt with identical issues in ways different from one another in many instances. In order to come to a similar conclusion about different theological and ethical issues they used different routes. Niebuhr concentrated on his emphasis on the flux of history, indeterminacy and transcendent freedom, all of which we noted in his treatment of the natural law question. Brunner, on the other hand concentrated on a more "scriptural" foundation with a particular emphasis on the concept of the "Divine Human Encounter", a theme much influenced by Martin Buber.

The fact that they both opposed the classic theories of natural law and yet both acknowledged the existence of a natural morality leads us to start from this point to examine the nature of Christian love, of the law of liberty, and of the revealed events in history which form the basis and content of their Christian ethic. For both of them, then, the idea of a moral choice being the result of a static natural law is unsatisfactory, as is the view that moral decisions are the product of the existential moment, or indeed wholly the product to be found within a solution of justification by faith.

For Brunner and Niebuhr the solution lies in an understanding of the relationship between love and law, and in the manner in which love has been revealed. In this chapter we shall examine the claim of Brunner and of Niebuhr that without the revelation of God in Christ, and without the revelation of the love of God on the Cross, there is no Christian ethic. I propose to examine the way in which each tackled the subject of the relation of love to law, including comments that they made about each other on that subject. After that I propose to examine the 'I-Thou' theories of Brunner, based on the teachings of Martin Buber, and also on the debate on 'Nature and Grace' which marked the departure of Brunner from Karl Barth, and which is important for its examination of general revelation.

The Christian ethic proceeds from a man allowing himself to be placed within the activity of God. Brunner says:

The good is that which God does; the goodness of man can be no other than letting himself be placed within the activity of God. This is what believing means in the New Testament. And this 'faith' is the principle of ethics. "Whatsoever is not of faith is of sin." (Rom 14:23). (1)

Since we have pointed out, in the first chapter, and in the study of Natural Law, that Brunner and Niebuhr derived their ethical teaching from the New Testament, through St Augustine, Luther and the nineteenth century critical school of theology, it will be necessary to see what the New Testament has to say about love specifically, and also how its teaching can give rise to such descriptions as transcendent, indeterminate and final.

First, the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself gave rise to the question, "Who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29) Jesus declined to answer the question and instead told a story that described neighbourliness. It was made clear in the story that one did not have to know one's neighbour, but that one did have to be a neighbour. At the end of the story Jesus asked a different question from that asked by the young man. He asked, "Which of the three proved to be a neighbour?" In this, the original question was radically transformed. The Samaritan phenomenon was, moreover, a hint of universalism in love. Kierkegaard's commentary on this is:

Christ does not talk about knowing one's neighbour, but about oneself being a neighbour, as the Samaritan proved himself one by his compassion. For by his compassion he did not prove that the man who was attacked was his neighbour, but that he was the neighbour of the one who was assaulted."

So love is un-claiming, and non-resisting. A Christian seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbour. (2)

The New Testament teaching on love is that it drives the self into anonymity, that it requires no reciprocation, or requital, that it is universal in its application, that it fails to recognise either friendship or enmity and that it drives the Christian into a state of neighbourliness, not as an abstract ideal, but as a response to being loved by God. That is the distinctive nature of Christian love. We love one another "because He first loved us".

Further, Christian love takes no account of feelings, preferences, emotions or taste. When told to love one's neighbour as oneself, one is not commanded to love oneself, but such love is for the self *inverted*. We noted in the first chapter of this thesis that it was Kierkegaard who persuaded Brunner that there was no real synthesis between Augustinian and Lutheran ideas on the one hand, and neo-Platonism on the other. Therefore, Kierkegaard's writings on this particular subject are relevant to the understanding of Brunner.

NIEBUHR ON 'LOVE AND LAW'.

The New Testament version of the Decalogue is the root and source of the debate. "Thou shalt love..." immediately presents us with a dilemma. "Thou shalt" implies a law, and love transcends any law and cannot be defined within a legal framework. Niebuhr describes this as a conflict between the "push of duty" and the "pull of grace". (3) If the law of love comes to us a "Thou shalt", then it is obviously a law. Subjectively, Niebuhr argues, we can have a sense of obligation to others without a definition of specific obligations. Love is the summary of all our obligations. On the other hand, if love means a perfect accord between our obligations and our inclinations, then duty is not felt as duty. In fact, "We love the thing that thou commandest". There is something Kantian here, except that Kant would disregard the second aspect of love, and claim the sense of obligation in its most universal sense is identical with the law of love.

Niebuhr continues his examination by quoting Luther, who, in his exposition of the life of grace, left "law" and "conscience" behind, along with sin

and self. Luther's view was that the freedom from the sense of "ought" is an ecstatic experience in which the individual can rise above every kind of prudence and feel at one with Christ, motivated by nothing other than gratitude for divine forgiveness. He further quotes Emil Brunner who, he says, "stands in the tradition of Luther when he also emphasises this transcendence over the 'ought', and declares that 'If we ought, it is a proof that we cannot'". (4) Commenting on that he suggests that while not so impotent as Brunner suggests, pure obligation is more impotent than is generally recognised. He cites the ineffectiveness of purely moralistic preaching.

The complicated relationship between law and love in both the objective and subjective senses is demonstrated by the contrast between the conception of the identity of love and the sense of obligation on the one hand, and the contradiction between them on the other. Niebuhr questions whether the Lutheran ideal can be achieved in any way outside the "common grace" of family love, or the occasional ecstatic experience, which is not really a description of even the life of the most dedicated Christian, and in any case, Luther asserts that man is "*simul justus et peccator*". It is a matter of universal observation that if man remains a sinner, then he must feel the constant pressure of anxieties and tensions, as well as the knowledge that he must forget himself if he is to help others. Clearly, there are some aspects of the law of love which belong more to the realm of duty than to the realm of Grace. The injunction, "If you love them who love you, what thanks have ye" (Matt 5:46) points to the universal obligation that we have.

Our concern for those beyond our circle, our obligation to the peoples of the world and the community of mankind, comes to us very much with the push of the "ought", against the force of our more parochial habits of grace. (5)

It is observable that purely moralistic teaching can be very tedious, and at the same time, Christian teaching about love can itself be loveless. The tension in the phrase "the law of love" arises, because on the subjective side love is a curious compound of willing, not by the strength

of our will, but by the strength which enters the will by Grace. Thus Niebuhr asserts:

"This defect in the liberal protestant attitude towards love is the subjective aspect of its lack of a doctrine of Grace." (6)

Objectively there is a danger of a lack of distinction between love and justice. In both these cases there is perhaps a failure to recognise the force of self-love, and man must recognise that Grace has meaning when life is measured at the limits of human possibilities, and it is at this point that man recognises that he "ought" to perform acts beyond his capacity for willing. These acts can only be performed by the strength man is given by the love of others, and, more importantly, by the Grace of God indwelling man's spirit.

In an essay entitled *Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism*, Niebuhr explores the relationship and examines the ways in which love can be seen to be transcendent over law. The tension between the concepts of love and law can briefly be summarised as the problem of the relation of duty to grace.

It is worth quoting Kierkegaard on this point.

"A man would no more be able to live exclusively according to the highest Christian concepts all the time, than he would be able to live by eating only at the Lord's Table". (7)

This is a polemic for grace and the transcendence of love over the "highest Christian principles". In spite of the influence that Kierkegaard had over Brunner it has to be said that there is a contrast of views here. This arises from Kierkegaard's distinction between the love of a person in his uniqueness, and love in its universal sense. Whereas Brunner, as we shall see, regards love as the direct product of the "I - Thou" encounter, or, as the title of his book terms it, "The Divine Human Encounter", Kierkegaard

sees love as that which regards the loved "self" as anonymously as possible.

'Christianity has not come into the world to teach you how specifically to love your wife or your friend, but how in common humanity you shall love all men. Love is a matter of conscience and hence not a matter of impulse or inclination. (8)

Brunner would not accept the distinction between universal and unique love and he would not place love in the area of conscience. Niebuhr similarly criticises Kierkegaard on this point.

Kierkegaard, despite his existential understanding of human selfhood, presents a legalistic version of universal love in his "Works of Love" according to which the love of a person in his uniqueness of a particular relation (as wife or husband for instance) has nothing to do with Christian love. (9)

Niebuhr's view is that the universalistic dimension of the love commandment is both within and beyond the love commandment as law. It represents the outer circumference of the totality of our obligations to our neighbours and to God.

It includes all of them, but goes beyond anything that can be defined. (10)

Likewise Tillich, in his book, *The Protestant Era*, comments:

'I have given no definition to love. This is impossible, because there is no higher principle by which it could be defined. (11)

Paul Ramsey enters into this controversy and defends Kierkegaard in an article on Niebuhr in Kegley and Bretall's book. He agrees that in one chapter of Kierkegaard's book *Works of Love*, he rhapsodises about the world "shalt" in the love commandment.

"But this is because he knows that love is the highest law, not materially beyond all law." (12)

Ramsey suggests that Niebuhr proved to be most helpful in his clarifying of the relationships between love, the natural law for freedom, and the 'first ethic' based on determinate aspects of human nature and society. The 'second ethic', in Kierkegaard's terms is that which transcends abstract Kantian norms - or indeed universalities of natural law based on fixed structures of human nature. Kierkegaard's contribution to the debate is to suggest that, in Christian love we close our eyes to every preferential relationship and then open them and "love the man we see". This is a definition of the material meaning of the law of love. Niebuhr clarifies the relations between such laws as the law of love and the intimate, preferential loves which clothe us in our daily life.

In the essay previously mentioned, Niebuhr points to four aspects of Christian love which, he says, make the point that if the problem of love and law is parallel with the relation of duty and grace, then, materially, the problem is the relation between love as the sum and total of all law, and love as defining indeterminate possibilities - transcending law. This raises the question of the extent to which man has an essential nature to which his actions ought to conform, and at the same time has the freedom to transcend structures, to stand beyond himself, and beyond any particular social situation. Every law is subject to indeterminate possibilities which in fact exceed any definition of the "ought". And yet man is not totally free of definition, for the indeterminate freedom is in itself a part of man's essential nature.

The first aspect of the transcendence of love over law which Niebuhr cites is "Universality". The freedom of man over historic situations means that his obligation to others cannot be limited to partial communities of nature and history. ("If ye love them that love you - what thanks have you? Mt. 5: 46)

This comes to us in the form of law. Indeterminacy in the sense of universality presents itself to us as an obligation, as we have seen.

This first element in the universality of love has already been described as being, in one respect at least, within the limits of law. For it describes the sum total of all our obligations to our fellow men without specific detail. It may come to us subjectively in the force of obligation in opposition to more parochial forms of love which are nourished by common grace . (13)

Niebuhr quotes the Catholic teaching on celibacy and virginity as an example of the Church's interpretation of the idea of love as universal. The institution of the family is, in his word, destroyed, so that there may be no impediment to universal love. This is an example of the Stoic influence on Catholic teaching, for Stoic natural law theories assume a determinate human freedom and equate the fixed structure of nature with the less fixed structures of human nature. Niebuhr's view is that the universalistic dimension of the love command is, in short, both within and beyond the love commandment as law.

Niebuhr identifies the second aspect of this transcendence as love as sacrificial . Here it is recognised that the self has freedom over itself as contingent object in nature and history. The question of the preservation of self in history becomes problematic. Further, the love commandment promises fulfilment through self-giving. "Whosoever loses his life shall find it". The 'agape' of Christ is defined as sacrificial love - the love of the Cross. "And walk ye in love even as Christ has loved you and given himself for you" (Eph 5:2).

Sacrificial love represents the second pinnacle of love, which represents both the completion and the annulment of love as law. It is the completion of the law of love because perfect love has no logical limit short of the readiness to sacrifice the self for the other . (15)

Since sacrificial love takes no account of prudence, and no calculation of mutual advantage, it falls outside the realm of law or code. You cannot formulate the sacrificing of one's life as an obligation, and so law, in the determinate sense, must stop with mutual love and distributive justice. Justice implies that the self regards itself as equal to the group involved

in the procedure of justice. The pursuit of justice is a form of love since the interests of neighbour are involved, and yet it falls short of ultimate love because self-interest is involved. The same argument holds true of "mutual" love. You cannot distinguish ultimate, or sacrificial love, from mutual love. There is no real line that can be recognised. Similarly, even on the subjective side, the distinction is unclear since total love may in fact be the result of a sense of obligation - and therefore a response to a law or sanction. The truth is that sacrificial love transcends the line of mutual love. It also redeems it, since without an element of heedless, or unprudential love, mutual love and the pursuit of justice would degenerate into carefully calculated self interest. Thus the relationship which Niebuhr sees between heedless love and mutual love is a dialectical relationship. They are not separate, but involved with each other in their difference.

It is here that Niebuhr seeks to use the concept of love, as opposed to law, to apply the Christian ethic to institutions as well as to individuals. He criticises traditional Protestant theories of love and justice, again on the basis that there is not sufficient dialectical content in the relationship.

In Luther's doctrine of the 'two realms' justice is consigned completely to the realm of law. There, nothing is known of Christ, even as in the realm of the Kingdom of Heaven nothing is known of law, conscience or the sword. The law in such a rigorous dualism does not even contain within it the desire to do justice. It is no more than a coercive arrangement which prevents mutual harm. (16)

Niebuhr describes the Reformation teaching on love and justice as a form of complacency or even defeatism, because of the apparent impossibility of establishing a more perfect justice which overcomes the inequalities of both nature and history. On this point he criticises Brunner for, as he sees it, Brunner's separating love from justice in too extreme a fashion.

This has prompted Brunner to speak of the hardness of every scheme of justice and of making too rigorous a separation between love and

justice. Love is reserved purely for personal relations, and the 'orders' seem designed only for the sake of order and a very rough justice. Any extant scheme of justice is, of course, very rough, judged by the standard of love. But the standard of love should not be merely a principle of indiscriminate judgement upon any and all possible historic systems. It should also be a source of discriminate judgement upon various systems of justice. For justice is the servant of love and there are more indeterminate possibilities of justice approaching the standard of love than Brunner realises. It is insufficient, for instance, to speak of the necessary hardness of penal justice when secular penology has psychiatrists to act as *amici curiae* to the court in dealing with child delinquency, a perfect example of a more living contact between love and justice than Brunner assumes.

I suspect that Luther's doctrine of the two realms plus the influence of Martin Buber's great work 'I-Thou' have persuaded Brunner to make this too radical distinction between the personal and the institutional, and to reserve love only for the realm of the personal, indeed individual, relations (17)

When we come to examine Brunner's contribution to this subject we shall see that there is indeed a more 'inter-personal' emphasis, but we shall also see that Brunner in no way neglects the task of bringing institutional life within the scope of a Christian ethic - and one dominated by the value of love.

The third aspect of love which makes it transcendent is identified by Niebuhr as 'Love as forgiveness.' He writes:

Forgiveness has the same relationship to punitive justice as sacrificial love has to distributive justice. Forgiveness is both a completion and an annulment of punitive justice. (18)

Here again Niebuhr presents the dialectical relationship between the two. Forgiveness completes justice because it looks into causal preconditions, extenuating circumstances and all the other factors which move the concept

of justice to a state of being remedial rather than punitive. At the same time it annuls punitive justice in the sense that Jesus recommends loving one's enemy, and points to the mercies of God, which extend to the just and the unjust. The parable of the labourers in the vineyard presents us with a situation where the divine mercy is challenged for being unjust, and defended, because it exceeds justice. The doctrine of atonement contains the paradox of mercy and judgement.

"There is no nice discrimination of merit and de-merit in forgiveness, any more than there is a nice discrimination of interests in sacrificial love. Here law is transcended. Forgiveness seems to be purely in the realm of grace". (19)

However, Niebuhr argues, even forgiveness comes to us partially in the category of love as law. "If we forgive not men their trespasses, neither will our heavenly Father forgive our trespasses". (Matt 7: 14-15). So we owe our brother our forgiveness - but as a grateful response to God's forgiveness of us.

The fourth and final aspect which Niebuhr cites in his demonstration of the transcendence of love over law is the idea of love as "standing in the place of the other". Again there is a problem here in relationships between various concepts and it can only be described in a dialectical way. First, the definition is that there is here a pinnacle of grace in the realm of love where the relation between persons is such that one individual penetrates sympathetically and imaginatively into the life of another. Since this describes the ordinary possibilities of love, above the level of justice as defined in natural law, this aspect of love is not among the counsels of perfection in the Catholic Church.

Rather, this love is the substance of Buber's exposition - 'I-Thou', and of Brunner's "Divine Imperative". Niebuhr criticises both on this count:

"It is wrongly interpreted as the very substance of the realm of love. For in that case love does not include the general spirit of justice, which expresses itself in the structures, laws, social arrangements and

economic forms by which men seek to regulate the life of the community and to establish a maximum of harmony and justice . (20)

We are again at the point where there is a divergence between Brunner and Niebuhr. Brunner holds that love is 'essentially inter-personal', as we shall see, and Niebuhr that it can be translated into human structures and institutions. It is important to note their similarities here. Each strongly defends the principle of justice, and each has similar conclusions in the realm of justice. The question is whether or not *agape* is directly translatable into various situations outside the close relationship of people.

Hence Niebuhr writes:

Brunner is in great error when he interprets an act of personal kindness as more "Christian" than a statesmanlike scheme in the interests of justice. Brunner's dictum that love "never seeks great things" is capricious. It separates love too completely from the realm of justice (21)

Niebuhr's view is that if you confine *agape* to interpersonal relations, then love ceases to be relevant to the problems of man's common life. And yet within the various structures of life, whether they are fixed by justice, or by custom or even by legal enactment, then the indeterminate possibilities of love, in the individual encounters which take place in the system, do affect the result.

Human actions can to a degree corrupt even the highest structure, and partially redeem even the worst structure. Kindness, or envy, or generosity or greed can affect any institution. The fact that slavery is wrong does not alter the fact that a slave's life can be made more tolerable by a generous master. Indeed Paul's view on slavery as recounted in Philemon suggests that the total change of heart that two Christians experience, one a slave and one a master, is in fact more powerful than the abolition of slavery as an institution. However, it still remains true

that the institution was wrong because of the disproportionate amount of power exercised by some, and the probability of its corrupting force.

It is where love and law are seen in this light that the whole question of grace, as a force, is seen. To love one's neighbour as oneself is indeed a law. It means an individual experience in which one penetrates deeply into the life of another and at the same time stands outside in reverence before a mystery which one has no right to penetrate. It is a law in the sense that the indeterminate freedom of man, which is part of his essential nature, requires that human relations should finally achieve that goal. But it is also a matter of grace since no sense of obligation can provide the forbearance and imagination by which this is accomplished.

These categories which Niebuhr identifies are useful in an analysis of the relationship between law and love. Nobody can deny the existence of law, but it is legitimate to question its fixity. If love transcends law, then law itself, whether by legal enactment, scriptural injunction or merely custom, must be relegated in the Christian ethic to its proper place. That it to say it must be seen as something within the activity of love - or to put it another way, within the activity of God, the author of all righteousness.

BRUNNER ON LOVE AND LAW

Brunner tackled the same question and his conclusion was similar to Niebuhr's, although he used a different method and approach. In his definition of love he used the concepts of eschatology and revelation, and in his description of the application of love, and its relationship to justice, he drew on the "I - Thou" concept which was central in his thinking, and which was the result of the influence on him of Martin Buber. He further set this argument within his concept of "command". Thus he writes:

The Command of God, so far as the subject is concerned, requires one thing only: existence in love, but this implies the existence of every virtue. (22)

In order to establish a Christian ethic without resorting to the traditional natural law theories, positive theological suggestions must be examined - and if we are to discover the validity of Christian ethics within theology itself, then it is all systematic theology that must be searched, starting with the Doctrine of God and working towards the doctrine of Grace, of revelation, of justification and so on. Brunner, who unlike Niebuhr made no self - deprecatory remarks about his worth as a systematic theologian, explored the possibility in all his works - not least in his two volume *Dogmatics*, and, in particular in his *The Christian Doctrine of God*.

Anders Nygren, the author of the book *Agape and Eros* commented on Brunner's contribution in this way,

The problem of the doctrine of God is to a high degree the problem of the relation between the Christian revelation of God, and the philosophical concept of God. Few contemporary theologians have comprehended the problem involved in the relationship as clearly as has Emil Brunner. He shows an extraordinarily penetrating grasp of the fatal role which neo-platonic ontology has played in the Christian doctrine of God. (23)

It is this placing of ethics closely at the heart of systematic theology, and at the same time recognising the existence of natural morality and 'general' revelation that makes Brunner's contribution so valuable, if not unique.

Brunner's teaching on the subject of Divine love and its relationship to human love is contained within his systematic theology, and, in particular in his *The Christian Doctrine of God*. Brunner here is conscious of the fact that the Divine love, in its essence, is something totally different from the human love. This is linked with Brunner's insistence on

revelation - and therefore is another vindication of his view that Christianity is not ontologically perceived, but is revealed.

All we can say at best is in the form of parable. It is not that we already know what 'love' is and then can apply it to God. Rather the situation is this: that the 'idea', the understanding of love - the 'agape' of the New Testament - can only be understood from what happens in revelation. The story of revelation, Jesus Christ, the crucified really defines the meaning of the new conception: love, which is 'agape'. Love is the self-giving of God; love is the free and generous grace of the one who is holy Lord. (24)

Brunner is here stating clearly that love and revelation belong together, and that all features of the Divine love have to be drawn from the Revelation. This love is bound up with revelation and it does not define itself in intellectual terms - but in an event. We have here common ground with Niebuhr who sees the value of the scriptural revelation as being a preferable explanation of the nature of man and of God than any other. Even the 'fall' of man is couched in historical-dramatic terms. Brunner argues that only in the 'event' of Christ - the Cross - do we find the love that is truly causeless, unmotivated, incomprehensible. It springs solely from the will of God Himself - that is from his incomprehensible will to give his very self to us. On the point of ethics, in relation to this, Brunner makes the point that the love of God is not an ethical quality.

‘Actually, the moral law does not come first but second. It does not come before, but after the love which is given to us.’ (25)

In asserting the transcendence of love over all virtues and possibilities, Brunner argues that love, in this sense, is not a human possibility at all, but is exclusively possible to God.

Love is an 'ultimate' eschatological possibility, for it will be the last thing when everything else, even faith, has vanished. (26)

Brunner continues by saying that the only way love can be achieved is by

allowing oneself to be loved by God, and that therefore the only way 'good' can be understood is from the point of view of justification. This clear reference to revelation - allowing oneself to be loved by God - and to the love of Christ who on the Cross brought about our justification, distances Brunner once more from the Thomistic view of 'virtues'. Brunner criticises the whole medieval system of morality on the basis that it "turns a quality which depends for its very existence on the reality of the Divine action, into a human quality". (27)

Having therefore placed the concept of love as a revealed and divine substance, Brunner can go on to demonstrate that the Divine Love is the only possibility of human loving. It is only possible to love when we feel ourselves to have perceived divine love, and so the law of love is that we should abide in his love.

In His prophetic message, Jesus summons men to love! The apostolic exhortation, which points back to the gift of God in Christ, summons men to live in love, or, still more plainly, to remain in love. (28)

Being in love is interpersonal, and we cannot obey a command to love God without first being loved by God. Brunner describes the commandment to love God as that which transcends the contrast between mysticism and morality.

It is the summons to remain within the giving of God, to return to Him again and again as the origin of all power to be good, or to do good. There are no other virtues alongside of the life of love. (29)

Note must be made here of the essentially scriptural view which Brunner held. He places great emphasis on the Johannine tradition of mutual love, and mutual indwelling, as well as on the Pauline teaching on love. "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). Brunner does not at this stage appear to struggle with the contradictions which Niebuhr identified as the "push of duty and the pull of grace". Placed in the context of Revelation, law and love become easier to reconcile because love is interpersonal, and love is revealed by God in Jesus Christ, and so the

command "to love" is really a "God view" of the human response to His love. Simply, you cannot love, no matter how powerful is the command, unless you are in love. God is in love with man. God initiates this love and in response to that initiative, man obeys the command. This is the force of the argument that virtues, understood in a Christian context, consist not in "doing good", but in "being good".

"I - THOU"

We have mentioned the influence of Buber in Brunner's thinking. It is in his description of "A life in love" that this influence becomes very powerful.

Community means life with the 'Thou'. From the ethical point of view the secret of faith is this - that the individual self loses its loneliness, that the 'I' breaks through to the 'Thou'.....that the 'I' is liberated, that this insane egocentricity has been healed, because the 'I' has been forced to admit the 'Thou'. (30)

This then is what happens when a man obeys the command to love his brother. Having admitted the 'Thou' he finds that there is not now one central position in life - the self - but two. The self - 'I' - and God - 'Thou' - and so he can love with God's love which is now part of the self.

This is the miracle, that the water has flowed upwards: no longer am 'I' the central point in my life; there are now always two central points. The self no longer merely regards life from the point of view of the 'I', but also from the point of view of the 'Thou'. (31)

Therefore in love, a person is always presented to one as a whole. You can only love a 'whole' person. To approve of any particular quality in a person is impersonal and neuter in character. This is an impersonal form of community, in knowledge, which is among the natural forms of community for definite purposes - but love does not merely amount to sympathy with,

say, another's mind, but takes in all of him. This is why it is difficult to define or to outline all its rules. The more abstract and the more impersonal a relationship, then the easier it is to formulate rules whereby you can control it. Law, Brunner says, only exists where there is something which can be isolated in an abstract manner. The more abstract and the more impersonal, then the easier it is to formulate laws.

But love itself cannot be defined except in negative terms. Love is life itself without all the corruptions that cling to it in the form of sin. This is the meaning behind the hymn to love in 1Cor. 13. Thus we cannot abstract from our neighbour certain elements, such as physical attributes, mind, or even environment, and love them - because love meets the 'Thou' and meets it in totality. Therefore there are no other virtues alongside love. Justice, truthfulness and all other desirable qualities within our personal relationships are all within love, and not an alternative or an addition to it.

'Love must always be the motive, even where the outward contact has to be determined by justice. The actual character of our duties is always determined by our calling, and therefore by justice; but justice should never be the actual motive'. (32)

The 'I - Thou' concept is valuable in a definition of love. If one sees that the 'Thou' comes to the 'I' as an act of revelation, and that the 'Thou' comes to the 'I' as total love - the love of the Cross, then it is revelation and justification which transform us and which begin the ethical solution. Love brings the 'I' and the 'Thou' together and since the 'I' is now dwelling with the 'Thou', it is the two centres of being which form the 'I' and that meets the 'Thou' in community. So the encounter in love in the community regards another individual as one who is conscious of an individual life and who is conscious of one's own individual life. It is an encounter of listening and sharing. Also it is an encounter with a whole being, including the elements of sin that exist in all of us. Love does not concede to the sin, but it does accept fully the 'Thou' who contains it - just as the 'Thou' who comes to us, accepts the 'I' in its unredeemed state.

SUMMARY OF THE LOVE-LAW DEBATE:

The differences between Niebuhr and Brunner on this issue are typical of most of their differences. Niebuhr is more adventurous perhaps, and more inclined to take account of indeterminate possibilities. Doubtless his American environment had some bearing on this, but as has been pointed out, he was a lone voice in America in his espousal of Reformation principles. Niebuhr confesses that theology becomes for him meaningful when he tackles ethical questions, and he is as close to Brunner as he is to anybody in his treatment of ethics.

Both share a common disagreement with Karl Barth on the question of natural morality and the nature of Revelation. Brunner's debate with Barth is what we shall deal with now, because Revelation is the fundamental vehicle for Christian insight, and grace is more important than law in determining the Christian basis for ethics. It is a major part of the importance of Brunner and Niebuhr that they found a position between thorough-going existentialism on the one hand, and solutions based entirely on Justification by Faith on the other. In spite of Niebuhr's criticism that Brunner was too hidebound in Lutheran traditionalism to apply his ethics to common life, we shall see that that is in fact an unfair criticism. It is perhaps more true to say that Brunner used systematic theology more consciously than Niebuhr, and therefore his conclusions were perhaps more cautious. Indeed it is a criticism of Brunner on the part of Niebuhr that he (Brunner) accepted too many of Barth's pre-suppositions in his debate on nature and grace. He therefore concludes that although he believes Brunner to be right, yet he lost the argument. Niebuhr is far more content to accept the dialectic of the reality of grace and the reality of nature, a sort of ontological dilemma, where he criticises Protestant theology for refusing to recognise the 'point of contact'. However we must take account of the fact that Niebuhr in his New World context did not have to grapple with the possibility of 'natural theology' being attached to a political ideology and, therefore, undergirding its racial theories.

NATURE AND GRACE

No account of Brunner's writing on the subject of law and revelation would be complete without a mention of the debate that took place between him and Karl Barth on the subject of Nature and Grace, and of general and special revelation. This debate became famous, and Brunner's departure from Barth on what was seen as a most important issue may have some bearing on the fact that he (Brunner) is not as widely read today as I believe he deserves to be. The debate between Brunner and Barth is so well documented and reported that it is not intended to concentrate on the debate as such, but rather on Brunner's view of Nature and Grace as they are applied to social ethics. The reply by Barth, "*Nein*", is terse and strong in its rebuttal of Brunner's views.

The argument begins with the concept of the revelation of God in creation. The world, Brunner says, is God's creation, and just as the artist is known by his works, so the spirit of the creator is in some way recognisable. The praise of God through his creation is an integral part of the Christian liturgy, and scripture upbraids man for not acknowledging it.

Therefore it seems to me a queer kind of loyalty to Scripture to demand that such a revelation should not be acknowledged, in order that the significance of Biblical revelation should not be minimised . (33)

Brunner argues that the creation of the world is at the same time a revelation - a self communication of God.

Nowhere does the Bible give any justification for the view that through the sin of man this perceptibility of God in his works is destroyed, although it is adversely affected.....Sin makes man blind to what is visibly set before our eyes. (34)

Brunner compares this with the conscience, which here he defines as the consciousness of responsibility. Using the same kind of logic, Brunner says:

'Only because men somehow know the will of God are they able to sin. Scripture testifies to the fact that the knowledge of the law of God is somehow also knowledge of God. (35)

From this point he posits the idea of two revelations. This is where 'natural theology' is defined. The first revelation is a 'general' revelation, in creation, and from this comes the revelation of the consciousness of responsibility. The second revelation is 'special' revelation, the result of the historical facts of Jesus.

Brunner admits that the pressing problem is to examine the way in which the two revelations are related. He says that the first answer is;

....for us sinful men, the first, the revelation in creation, is not sufficient in order to know God in such a way that this knowledge brings salvation'. (36)

The third concept, after the two concepts of revelation, is the concept of 'preserving grace'. This means the manner in which God is present to his fallen creature.

Again, Brunner admits to the danger of such a view. To argue for natural theology, natural morality and general revelation, and then to add the argument of preserving grace, places Brunner's theology at a sort of frontier, where he is challenging, or appears to be challenging, the concept of particularity. "No man can come to the Father but by Me", is a statement that appears to have little room for natural theology, and bearing in mind Brunner's Lutheran and Augustinian background we shall need to see how he reconciles the two. The answer will lie, as we have already noted, in the importance he places on the ethical question as a prime question, and as a 'point of contact'.

Of 'preserving grace' he says':

'Preserving grace is a concept of quite undoubted biblical dignity. It is necessary to emphasise this specially, as it is, in a manner of speaking, a dangerous concept. For from it our thinking can easily slip into a pantheistic doctrine of immanence.....Only in the light of the revelation in Christ is it possible to speak correctly of preserving grace. But the Christian is now under the serious obligation to speak of it - by way of thanksgiving. That God is so good that he makes his sun shine on the evil and on the good, that he gives us life, strength and health, in short the whole sphere of natural life and its goods - all that must be included in the concept of preserving grace or- as it is therefore called - general grace. In the faith of Christ we know that even before we knew the saving grace of Christ, we lived by the grace of God, i.e. by the 'preserving' grace of God, without properly knowing it . (37)

The important point to note in this is Brunner's insistence that although he argues for the existence of natural theology - this time in the form of 'preserving grace', yet he also argues that this is not perceivable without the benefit of the special revelation in Christ. In other words, 'special' pre-supposes 'general' revelation; but although 'general' revelation thus exists without 'special' revelation, it requires 'preserving' grace to make ordinances understandable to man.

Within the sphere of this preserving grace belong, above all, those 'ordinances' which are the constant factors of historical and social life, and which therefore form a basic part of all ethical problems. (38)

As an example of ordinances he cites matrimony. He says that this is a 'natural' ordinance because the possibility of, and the desire for its realisation lies within human nature, and because it is realised to some extent by men who are ignorant of God revealed in Christ.

This is a powerful argument for the influence of natural theology in ethical ideas. Although Niebuhr, as we saw in the Natural Law debate, criticised Brunner for his emphasis on the Lutheran concept of 'orders',

yet on the subject of the application of grace to the 'constant factors of historical and social life', he comes very close to Brunner when he describes the love of family as an example of 'common grace'. At least he accepts the principle of common grace - which he describes as that which nourishes our more parochial forms of love - and is insufficient to nourish our obligation to love in a universal sense. (See note 13).

From this point Brunner proceeds with an investigation into the concept of "*imago dei*", steering a course between Stoic ideas which speak of a 'divine spark' within man's nature, and the wholly Barthian view of man as naturally totally depraved. He says that there are two aspects of the image of God, one 'formal' and the other 'material'. Notice here that he does not distinguish, as Aquinas did, between 'image' and 'likeness'. The formal aspect is that he is by nature a man, and nothing has removed that certainty. The material is that which has been lost in the fall. The formal definition of the 'image of God' is 'the point of contact' with the revelation of God. Man is receptive of words and the fall has not done away with that. Barth argues forcefully that there is no natural 'point of contact' between man and God except in Christ. Christ is the sole mediator, and without Christ there is no vestige of the image of God in man. But Brunner says:

This possibility of man's being addressed is also the presupposition of man's responsibility. Only a being which can be addressed is responsible, for it alone can make decisions. Only a being that can be addressed is capable of sin. But in sinning, while being responsible, it somehow or other knows of its sin. This knowledge of sin is a necessary presupposition of the understanding of the divine message of grace. It will not do to kill the dialectic of this knowledge of sin by saying that knowledge of sin comes only by the grace of God. This statement is as true as the other, that the grace of God is comprehensible only to him who already knows about sin. The case is similar to the divine ordinance, or the law. Natural man knows them

and yet does not know them.....Sin is always in the sight of God'. (39)

Brunner continues the argument in a dialectic vein, thereby confounding Niebuhr's criticism that European Protestant theology is not sufficiently dialectic. In sin there can be no knowledge of God, for the true knowledge of God is the abolition of sin. This dialectic, Brunner says, must not be one-sidedly abolished. On the contrary it must be strongly insisted on. For only in this dialectic does the responsibility of faith become clear. He who does not believe is himself guilty, and he who believes knows that it is pure grace.

'We have said that materially there is no more *imago Dei*, whereas formally it is intact. Similarly we must say that materially there is no point of contact, whereas formally, it is a necessary presupposition. The Word of God does not have to create man's capacity for words. He has never lost it. But the Word of God itself creates man's ability to hear it in such a way as is only possible in faith. It is evident that the doctrine of '*sola gratia*' is not the least endangered by such a doctrine of the point of contact. (40)

The argument is powerful, and the defence of the doctrine of '*sola gratia*' is important. The divide between Brunner and Thomism is, in fact larger than that between Brunner and 'Barthianism'. There is no doubt in Brunner's view, or in Niebuhr's, of the power of sin, and of the effectiveness of Grace. There is no doubt either about the uniqueness of revelation in Christ and the power of the Cross. The difference between Brunner and Barth lies in the concept of natural morality, natural theology and natural revelation. These are all very different from 'natural law', but Barth sees them as the beginning of a slippery slope. He rigorously condemns the concept of the 'point of contact', and questions whether, beyond obvious common sense, Brunner is suggesting that man is acting in concert with the grace that comes to him in revelation. If that is so, Barth argues, "What of '*sola scriptura*', '*sola gratia*'? Also, as we have seen, he argues that all revelation is 'saving', and that which is not saving is not revelation.

However, Brunner persists in his concept of the 'point of contact'. He argues that it includes not only the *humanum* in its narrowest sense, but everything connected with the 'natural' knowledge of God.

A man without conscience cannot be struck by the call - 'Repent ye and believe the Gospel'. (41)

Natural man's knowledge of God and of the law and of his own dependence may be very confused and distorted - but it is the necessary, indispensable point of contact for divine grace.

The final point to examine in Brunner's defence of natural theology is his concept of 'orders'. We shall deal specifically with this concept in detail at a later stage, but where it affects his perception of natural theology, we can examine it briefly at this stage. Mention was made in the 'natural law' section, of the danger which Niebuhr considered Brunner risked in his emphasis on orders. Barth similarly criticised this concept, although from a different view point. Brunner says:

Barth pointed out to me the political danger of Gogarten's doctrine of the ordinances. His verdict was that in that concept there was hidden a whole political and cultural programme of a distinctively authoritarian stamp. Events have proved how right he was.' (42)

He then proceeds to justify his ideas, not this time, by pointing out his emphasis on the reality of history, as he had done with Niebuhr, but with demonstrating that he had always taught that there are two ways to conceive orders. One is strictly conservative and authoritarian, a stance which Brunner roundly condemned in the introduction to *The Divine Imperative*. The other, which might be called revolutionary or conservative with equal justification, is a refracted concept of orders, corresponding to the refraction in the *theologia naturalis* of the Reformers. He makes the point that the theologian's attitude to *theologia naturalis* decides the character of his ethics. Historically, it may be said that the concept of the

ordinances of creation has been regulative for Christian ethics from the beginning to the time of the Enlightenment, in all matters connected with the problem of society as such - i.e. in the doctrine of the ministry, secular vocation, matrimony, the state and so on.

Christian social ethics throughout the centuries may be defined as the doctrine of the love founded in Jesus Christ, and of its function in society, 'according to the divine institution of the latter'.

'Social ethics are therefore always determined as much by the concept of the divine grace of creation and preservation as by that of the redeeming grace of Christ. . (43)

Natural theology is therefore also of decisive importance for the dealings of Christians with unbelievers. There is clearly a warning here that true principles could be betrayed, but the task, however, remains.

Theologia naturalis, imago Dei, and responsibility are the centre on which everything turns. What is central is not dogmatics, nor eristics, nor ethics, but solely the proclamation of the word of God itself. But a true understanding of *theologia naturalis* is of decisive importance for all three, and also for the manner of proclamation. . (43)

The nature of the dialectic content of Brunner's view on this can best be seen if we quote him in the same thesis. In spite of his arguments for natural morality and his insistence on the concept of the 'point of contact', he says, and Barth makes a point of quoting him as saying:

'We are concerned with the message of the sovereign, freely electing grace of God. Of his free mercy God gave to man - whose will is not free, but in bondage - His salvation in the Cross of Christ, and by the Holy Spirit who enables him to assimilate this word of the Cross. . (45)

CONCLUSION:

To summarise, we are left with the situation that both Brunner and Niebuhr accept the existence of natural theology, but that Niebuhr does not accept all of the 'Barthian' presuppositions which Brunner accepted. Both also accept the function of Grace in determining the nature of Christian thinking - as opposed to classical theories of natural law. Further, they see revelation as the means whereby men are made conscious of God and of His command. Therefore, Revelation, Nature and Grace are the components of the means of establishing a system of Christian ethics. Most important is the agreement between Brunner and Niebuhr on the question of the concept of the 'point of contact'. Niebuhr says:

'Protestant theology is wrong in denying the point of contact ... (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) which always exists in man by virtue of the residual element of *justitia originalis* in his being. (46)

The debate about nature and grace, particularly between Barth and Brunner, re-defined 'orthodoxy', and although Niebuhr addressed himself to the same question, one must remember that, for him, the Reformation tradition had to be expressed in a specifically New World context, and that means that there was no way in which, as in Europe, 'natural Theology' could be used in political ideology to undergird its racial and other theories. In fairness to Barth, that was a very major concern of his, and it is true that Protestant theology did not effectively counter the rise of European Fascism as well as it might have done.

1. Emil Brunner *The Divine Imperative* p 55
2. Kierkegaard *Works of Love* p 19
- 3 Reinhold Niebuhr 'Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism'
Published in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*. McAfee Brown(ed)
- 4 *Ibid* p 144
- 5 *Ibid* p 145
- 6 *Ibid* p 146
- 7 *Works of Love* p 39
- 8 *Ibid* p 116
- 9 McAfee Brown (ed) *op cit* p 149
- 10 *Ibid* p 149
- 11 Paul Tillich *The Protestant Era* p 160
- 12 Kegley and Bretall (ed) *op cit* p 152
- 13 McAfee Brown (ed) *op cit* p 147
- 15 *Ibid* p 150
- 16 *Ibid* p 151
- 12 Kegley and Bretall *op cit* p 271
- 18 McAfee Brown *op cit* p 153
- 19 *Ibid* p 153
- 20 *Ibid* p 154
- 21 *Ibid* p 155
- 22 Emil Brunner *The Divine Imperative* p 163
- 23 Kegley and Bretall (ed) *op cit* p 178
- 24 Emil Brunner *The Christian Doctrine of God* p 185
- 25 *Ibid* p 197
- 26 *The Divine Imperative* p 164
- 27 *Ibid* p 165
- 28 *Ibid* p 165

- 29 *Ibid* p 165
- 30 *Ibid* p 320
- 31 *Ibid* p 320
- 33 Emil Brunner and Karl Barth *Natural Theology - inc Nature and Grace and Nein* p 24
- 34 *Ibid* p 24
- 35 *Ibid* p 25
- 36 *Ibid* p 27
- 37 *Ibid* p 28
- 38 *Ibid* p 30
- 39 *Ibid* p 31
- 40 *Ibid* p 35
- 41 *Ibid* p 37
- 42 *Ibid* p 57
- 43 *Ibid* p 58
- 44 *Ibid* p 57
- 45 *Ibid* p 78
- 46 R Harries (ed) *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time* p 197

CHAPTER 4

PARTICULAR EMPHASES OF BRUNNER AND NIEBUHR

INTRODUCTION:

At this point of the thesis we shall look at Brunner and Niebuhr separately and examine particular emphases which they employed. We have already noted that their different environments influenced them and there was a definite divergence in a number of issues which concerned not their conclusions, but their approach to the problem.

However their similarities are more marked than their differences. We can summarise this on the evidence seen so far in this thesis in this way. Both avoided too radical an approach to the question of ethics. In spite of their common rejection of classical natural law theories they both accepted the possibilities of natural morality and natural theology. Both accepted that ethics is integral to theology, and not an addition to it, and that Christian ethics is distinct from any other system. Both rejected neo-platonic and ontological approaches and both placed at the centre of their teaching the Cross, and the nature of Grace.

We shall first examine some of Emil Brunner's particular characteristics, starting with this observation. One of the main reasons for his comparative eclipse in recent years may well be his disagreement with Barth on the question of natural theology. Barth, as we have seen, took a particularly radical stance on that question. Certainly, the point that the acceptance of 'natural orders' can give rise to unacceptable forms of authoritarianism is valid and, in our times, important. Barth wrote in the context of the rise of European Fascism, and there are similarities today in the situation in, say, South Africa. There are those who have found Barth's radicalism here of great value. It is also possibly a defence against the emergence of a liberation theology. Until recently, that is to say, until the findings of Vatican 2, Thomism can be said to have given rise to an authoritarian church. And Luther's concept of 'natural orders' was set in the context of medieval society with its built in power

structures and patterns of authority. The fundamental point about authority is that it can be said to leave little room for 'grace'. Further, the tainting of man with sin is such that human authority is bound to be corrupting as it exercises its functions. Therefore to postulate natural orders runs the risk of encouraging unacceptable forms of government and power.

However, the argument concerning natural orders and natural law is not rendered valid, or invalid, merely because of observation. Validity, in this sense, is not empirical, but theological. Brunner defended himself against this accusation when it was made by Niebuhr, as we saw in the chapter on 'Natural Law'. Also, to accept completely the stance that Barth held, is to ignore the powerful arguments about the 'point of contact', the awareness of sin and the concept of preserving grace. In short, to postulate a system of ethics based entirely on justification by faith and revelation, is open to the charge of being as narrow as Thomism. Thomism lacks the scope for appreciating the liberating and transcendent features of love and grace in the natural realm. Barthianism lacks the sense of universalism that is implicit in all New Testament statements of ethics. The point that Niebuhr and Brunner are making is that there is a dialectical relationship between natural theology and the special revelation of God in Jesus, and between the preserving grace which God showers on all people, irrespective of who they are, and the grace by which we are saved, and which motivated the sacrifice on the Cross.

EMIL BRUNNER'S PARTICULAR EMPHASES. 1. THE DIVINE HUMAN ENCOUNTER

Paul Tillich has this to say of Brunner:

In perhaps his most suggestive book, *The Divine Human Encounter*, Brunner develops a theological epistemology which seems to me both biblical and existentialist, and, most important, adequate to the subject matter with which theology has to deal'. (1)

The subject of the Divine-Human Encounter is dealt with in three other of Brunner's works. They are *The Divine Imperative*, *Man in Revolt* and a series of essays entitled *God and Man*. It is apparent from the titles of these books - all comparatively late in his work - that Brunner continued to concern himself with what we may call the human side of the principle of dialecticism. We saw, early in this thesis, evidence to suggest that a moral theologian tends to be more aware of the realities of human life, and the dilemmas facing the Church, than other theologians. There is a difference of interest here again between Brunner and Barth. Barth laid stress on the 'freedom of God' from all forms of natural theology, including that of Brunner, while Brunner in turn worked out the general principles of anthropology as over and against what he thought of as false doctrines of man, including those of Barth. Brunner felt that Barth had done injustice to the biblical doctrine of the responsibility of man. In the preface to *Man in Revolt*, he says:

'With the publication of this book I hope I have redeemed the promise made in the foreword to the second edition of "Nature and Grace", namely, that only a completely theological anthropology, which begins with the central truths of the Christian faith - the Trinity, Election, Incarnation - and is directed towards the final redemption, will be in a position, without causing any misunderstandings, to show clearly my concern, as against Karl Barth - namely, man's responsibility (2)

The fact is that Brunner, in order to maintain the concept of human responsibility, uses categories of recent existentialist philosophy whereas Barth claims to have cut himself loose from all philosophy in general, and existentialism in particular. Brunner asserts that he has no quarrel with ordinary anthropology and frankly continues to use Kierkegaard's notion of the individual.

It is with the help of this notion alone, he argues, that we understand and maintain human responsibility. By the help of this notion, he adds, we know that the man whom God created is both

individual and humanity. In the individual, the particular and the universal are brought together. (3).

We have already examined the influence which Martin Buber had on Brunner, summed up in the "I-Thou" concept. *The Divine Human Encounter* is Brunner's development of that thesis and he applies it to a wide range of theological principles, not least that of Christian ethics. We shall see in this section the importance attached to this concept. It would be fair to say that, for Brunner, the idea of the 'personal' and the 'individual' is paramount. It is here that he shows himself to be a true disciple of Reformation theories. One of the main polemics of the Reformation was the 'individual' response of man to God - and the 'individual's' accountability to God - and the 'individual's' access to the "Throne of Grace".

Brunner's teaching on this runs throughout his works, and we shall see that the concept of the 'individual' is central to his systematic theology - and, in particular, his Doctrine of God, and it is taken up in his ethical teaching, forming a major part of his work 'The Divine Imperative'. This is said to demonstrate that for Brunner, systematic theology and ethics are one and the same thing.

It is only in the notion of the individual, argues Brunner, that we have the true understanding of personality. Man is created that he may become a personality. In Christ, as the true universal, and the true particular, the ideal person stands ever before him. It is only the Bible which correctly states the nature of man, in its dialectical treatment of 'creation' and 'fall'. We have already seen in this thesis, in the first chapter that Niebuhr also states that the Genesis myths present a more accurate and believable doctrine of the nature of man than philosophy, psychology or any political system. The historic - dramatic form of the fall of man is a more satisfactory answer. Man's life is subject to history in its corrupting and liberating forms. (4)

'To know oneself as existing in the contradiction, so that the contradiction is one that affects all, and, further, to know that the

contradiction really goes through oneself, through one's centre, one's reality, and finally, to know that in this knowledge one does not flee out of the reality of existence, but, on the contrary, only thus attains true reality -- to know oneself in such a fashion is to know oneself as a sinner. This is the specifically Christian and Biblical contribution to the self-knowledge of man. (5)

In this Brunner and Niebuhr are of one mind. It is important to emphasise that in the basic question of 'sin' and its place in the nature of man, both agree. Brunner continues with his emphasis on 'personality'. This is described in terms of its relationship to God and its relationship to the concepts of sin and the fall.

..The Bible speaks of sin, because it speaks of man as the creature of God, and of God as the Lord of man. . (6)

God and man cannot be mentioned together without taking account of sin and of the fall. It is an essential part of the relationship, and an essential part of the Lordship of God over man that man has sinned. It is true that God is Lord of the atoms - but He gets no recognition from them. Only through man's recognition of Him does He appear Lord over him. Brunner argues here strongly against ontological systems when he asserts that philosophy and science know nothing of this. Such systems are centred on man. They work out their systems, naturalistic, idealistic, or even romantic, but in these systems they never meet God. Through a system one never comes into contact with reality.

This point is taken up in his work *Mysticism and the Word*. Brunner is here dealing with the 'subject - object' relationship and here he offers some quite new thinking on the question. It is when one takes into account the fundamentals of the Christian doctrine of man, its relationship to the doctrine of sin, and their relationship with the doctrine of God, that one can forcefully argue the case for ethics to belong firmly within theology and nowhere else. We shall quote Brunner at some length on this because it is at the core of the entire thesis.

"Naturalistic and idealistic systems of psychology, of ethics or of epistemology all deal with the ordinary 'subject - object' relationship and thus miss real contact with personality. Dealing, as they do, with a *priori* epistemological and ontological principles, these systems have no eye for God and for His relationship with man. They know nothing of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom, and thus fail to understand the true nature of reality. The Bible, therefore, must be the source and norm of all theology. By faith alone can we know reality and God. In thought we deal with 'something' - in faith we deal with God.

A 'something' I can control and possess. It does not really change me by taking me beyond myself. It has come forth from myself. But when God speaks to me, He changes me. He turns about the whole of my existence; He lifts me out of myself and breaks my loneliness. The monologue of my existence becomes a dialogue. Thus the 'subject - object' relationship has disappeared and I stand personally before God..... I know God in His love, and knowing God in His love, I know myself as addressed by God. God's Lordship over me is at the same time His fellowship with me - and through this fellowship alone, I have my being . (7)

It is this passage, which is echoed in *The Divine Human Encounter*, in Brunner's *Dogmatics*, and again in *The Divine Imperative*, that suggests that Brunner has steered the right course between Barthianism and natural law theories. It is scriptural, and it takes proper account of alternatives.

David Cairns has contributed an appreciation of Brunner in Kegley and Bretall's work. He refers especially to this part of Brunner's teaching and demonstrates just how central it is in his systematic theology by quoting from his book *Dogmatics*.

Cairns points out that the phrase "to know God" is existential and not theoretic. It is a knowledge of and not a knowledge that. That is to say, knowledge of God is mediated through historic events, and through revelation. Thus of his knowledge of God Brunner says:

'When God the Lord meets me in Jesus Christ, I know that He is the Creator and that I am His creature. And conversely, only in this encounter do I know that I am His creature'. (8)

This is an existential form of knowledge. It is not acquired through ratiocinative processes, but through experience and through revelation. Brunner would say that there is no doctrine of God without the experience of Him. In the Bible God is always mentioned in relation to community and to activity. He is not a philosophical concept or the result of man's thinking.

Brunner's Christian Doctrine of Man continues in the same style.

In Jesus Christ, God meets me as the one who gives Himself freely to me, and at the same time, claims me entirely for Himself, as Holy Love. As such He reveals Himself to me, but in so doing He reveals me at the same time to myself in the original nature He has given me..... Once more both are linked in co-relation. It is one and the same thing to know of the holy loving God, and of this human nature of mine as it springs from the Creator's hand. (9)

And so the Christian doctrine of man is bound up with the 'individual' and with the 'personal' concepts which are so central in Brunner's teaching. Further there is an integrated approach to the whole problem. The nature of God, the nature of man, the nature of sin and the doctrine of creation are all part of the same doctrine. Man's ethical response is also part of that doctrine. Brunner is powerfully arguing the case for the Divine Initiative. And so the human response is part of the nature of God. How man responds is in relation to how God is. In a passage headed "A Living Free Response", Brunner writes:

God wills to have a creature which does not reflect to Him His glory, as the other created beings do, as the mere object of His will. He desires an active and spontaneous 'reflection'. He, who creates

through the Word, who creates as Spirit, creates in freedom, looks for a reflection that is more than a reflex, an answer to His word, which is a free act of the Spirit. Only thus can the love really impart itself as love. For love can only impart itself when it is received in love. That is why the creaturely existence of man is, in essence, freedom, selfhood.". (10)

2 THE CALL

Brunner's work, *The Divine Imperative*, which, as we saw in the first chapter, is an unsatisfactory translation of the German title, "*Das Gebot und die Ordnungen*", is his major work on Christian ethics. The title expresses his concern with two major concepts - 'command' and 'orders'.

In the chapter on Natural Law we dealt at some length with the concept of 'orders', and here we shall examine what Brunner has to say about 'command', or 'calling'. Again this is part of his preoccupation with the idea of the 'personal' and the 'individual'. The Divine Imperative is a major work not merely because it is one of Brunner's longest books, but because it is arguably the first treatise on ethics from a Protestant standpoint for very many years, and it has not been replaced with anything as weighty. True, it has much in common with Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, with the writings of Karl Barth, and, of course, with Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, although the last named is probably better compared with Brunner's *Man in Revolt*, in view of the considerable anthropological insights common to both. The Divine Imperative combines systematic theology with ethical principles. It puts ethics firmly at the 'entrance' to the Christian faith and asserts that no doctrine of God is satisfactory without a corresponding ethical response.

In a section entitled 'The Calling', a reflection of the German *Das Gebot*, Brunner asserts at the beginning:

"God's command is wholly personal. Therefore it is wholly concrete. God never requires 'something in general', He does not issue

proclamations, nor does He set up any kind of programme. He never issues commands into the air - with the idea that any one may hear them who happens to feel like it! He tells me, or us, or you, as definite persons to do some definite thing. (11)

At this point Brunner makes a concession to fact that a general sort of law, like a general sort of grace, has its place in the Divine purposes, and that this forms a basis whereby the individual is able to hear the Divine command - but the command itself is personal. The 'calling' is what represents the difference between legalistic morality and Christian morality. The first element of the call is that a Christian is called to be God's. The Creator has turned towards the creature. "I am the Lord thy God". (Exodus 20:2) "I have loved thee with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3) "I have called thee by name, thou art mine". (Isaiah 43:1) So 'calling' is the expression of election. The first element of the 'call' is that we are elected, and the divine grace is communicated to Christians. The individual is now called to be with God.

The second element of the 'call' is that we are called to serve Him. Again, this is not a universal law but a personal command. Each individual Christian is called to serve. Brunner says that the personal call is the word of the Holy Spirit, and that obedience to it is part of it.

'To hear this call, really and truly, and to obey it, actually means the same thing. If I do not obey the call then I have not really heard it aright. Obedience is grace, and grace is obedience'. (12)

There follows a section where Brunner identifies this call with man's justification, and where he asserts the sufficiency of grace, so that man is called personally where he is and as he is. The call represents the 'new garments', and no work on man's part can achieve what God has achieved in His calling of man. He then says - and this is the heart of his ethical teaching:

This expresses one of the most profound truths of ethics, indeed one of the most profound truths which have ever been conceived by the mind of man, namely the idea of the 'Calling', which is so characteristic of the thought and teaching of Paul and Luther. When Luther drew forth this forgotten truth from beneath the rubbish heap of the ecclesiastical ethic, which had been corrupted by Aristotelean and ascetic ideas, it was an act of significance for the whole of world history, an act of overwhelming importance". (13)

To justify such an apparently extravagant claim it is necessary to remind oneself that in the Middle Ages the term 'vocatio' was applied to monasticism and when later it was applied to those living in the world it pre-supposed a clerical 'caste'. The medieval idea of 'classes' was only broken down by Luther's revival of the teaching of the 'priesthood of all believers'. Indeed Luther used the word 'Beruf', calling, as an expression of the new view of life in the world. Calling, in the Reformation, became 'secularised' as opposed to 'clericalised'.

Further, in this section, Brunner claims that this idea of the call is an immediate consequence of the doctrine of justification by faith. God wills to allow a sinful man, in all his sinfulness, to work for Him. There is no abstract law that can depreciate the service rendered by sinful man. The only form of 'hallowed service' is that which has been called by God, and a service rendered by 'pure' agents, within conditions actually 'pure', does not exist.

Within the concept of the personal and concrete 'call' one must take account of the concept of divine providence. For God to call a man in his sinfulness and to challenge him to obey the call where and as he is, is not to say that God has no knowledge of what has been previously done. Nothing that happens, happens without the knowledge of God. There is nothing capricious or accidental about the state of a man and it must be said that the Providence of God governs the world and not just His followers.

Here Brunner says that the introduction of the concept of Providence into ethics is a process that must be handled with great caution, for it has done a great deal of damage in this sphere. His argument centres on the idea of the time ahead and the time in the past. It runs thus. Providence threatens to justify the *status quo* and to paralyse the moral will. This is not the fault of providence but the result of a misunderstanding of the nature of the ethical moment. The difference between the time past and the time ahead is that one can merely contemplate the time past and can exercise no ethical power over it. It has already been decided. The future, though, is not decided and one is called to an act of decision. Therefore, ethically the two times are different, although one does not know this 'theoretically'. Theoretically, all one can do is to contemplate, and so the future can become the past. So theoretically the future can be 'killed' by it being regarded as already fixed. Ethically, one should stand between the times and realise that the present is the time to which God has brought us, and the present is when God commands us to act. God wills one to act at a particular time and in a particular place, conscious indeed of the past, but not responsible for the past. In spite of the sinfulness of the present, God 'covers' it with His forgiveness and the place and the time are pure. A Christian has thus received the 'call' to be God's and also the call to serve God - and this is 'pure'.

The place is 'pure', no matter how bad it may be in itself. It is 'pure' through the call of God. And this paradoxical purity, this making holy of that which is in itself unholy, through God's forgiving call: this is *the Calling*. (14)

It is because of the power of the call and its presence here and now in the sinful state of man, that man can act in good conscience. One can only act in good conscience by faith - and so 'the call' and 'justification by faith' are intertwined. A man who has not experienced this justification, who has not been a part of the Divine-Human encounter cannot live without an uneasy conscience. In religious circles, Brunner says, two alternatives are inevitable. The first is monasticism, a denying of all the world's pleasures in order to find purity, and the second is a kind of compromise

morality enjoined on the great majority of people, and sustained by sacramental feeding with regular absolutions and so on.

Also, there is no real refuge for the morally earnest man who has not experienced justification. The person who sees it as his mission in life to 'clean up' the various parts of society which do not conform to his moral view, is a person who in the process loses the secret of living and becomes cynical or hostile. Such a person is ignorant of the nature of sin, and the fate of some of the very 'best' of people can be a lapse into a sort of modern fanaticism.

Brunner says:

The idea of the 'Calling' makes short work of this fanaticism and the spirit of hopeless acquiescence to which it leads. Here what matters most is not the improvement of one particular place in the world, of conditions and circumstances - although such procedure has its own secondary importance - not the search for 'the right place for me', but the thankful acceptance of the place, at which I am now set, from the hands of Providence, as the sphere of my life, as the place in which I am to meet my neighbour in love. The idea of 'Calling' makes us free from all feverish haste, from bitterness, and from the inevitable and hopeless resignation of the reformer'. (15)

This passage is worthy of careful consideration, not merely because it is a sound polemic for 'the Call' in the face of providence, and the impossibility of morality without justification; and not merely because it uses the concept of time and place in ethics to assert an existentialist position, but because it could well be one of the main passages in this book which led to its being declared illegal by the German authorities. It contains a scarcely concealed attack on the philosophy of National Socialism in Germany at that time, with its fanatical reforming zeal and its quest to create a pure race for the Fatherland. It is worth noting that in our generation there are those 'radicals' who have a zealous appetite for reform who, from the point of view of a Christian, should be challenged with the 'Call', and the reality of the individual and personal

response to God, in ethical terms. In this passage, Brunner is not merely asserting a Protestant position as opposed to a Catholic position. He is also asserting what he sees as the only Christian answer to the emergence of fanaticism in public life. We have already seen that the Word of God is given *to the Church for the world* - and the Church must give an answer to the movements in the world which lead to tyranny and oppression. Brunner is saying that the answer lies in the concept of the 'personal', the 'individual' and the 'call'.

Still on the subject of the 'call', Brunner points to other dangers which are the result of a mis-conception. The very term, 'calling' has become debased in ordinary use. It has come to mean merely the following of a particular occupation, and one's share of duty which falls to the lot of an individual in the whole economy of labour. Also, in theological terms the term has been open to abuse - primarily because of a lack of understanding of the nature of justification by faith, but also because of a warping of the Lutheran idea whereby people discovered a new respect for the economic and social spheres of life as a result of Luther's teaching on 'calling'.

Brunner explains it this way:

The point is that here, world pessimism has been overcome, while at the same time, the radical corruption of the world and the absolute character of the divine law are recognised. All that Luther cared about was to secure the possession of a good conscience in one's calling, and to do away with the unsatisfactory alternatives: renunciation of the world, or compromise. (15)

Brunner is here pointing out the danger of what is frequently called the 'Protestant work ethic' which has elevated capitalism to the level of an ideal and has disregarded the inequitable results of various capitalistic systems. He cites the evils of unemployment as an example of this.

The answer to the dilemma here lies in a more eschatological understanding of the concept of the 'call'. What distinguishes the Christian concept



from the secular concept is that the Christian is called, not only into the world, but out of it as well. It is true that God calls man in the world, but He also calls him to his Heavenly Kingdom. The call is to a particular place in the world. It is concrete, it is personal and it is compelling - but it is also to work in the Lord's Vineyard, and to do one's duty as an act of obedience to the call, is to be a citizen of the coming Kingdom of God.

'The Here and Now constitute the necessary narrowness, the vision of the coming Kingdom, the necessary breadth for right action within the calling. If there were no narrowness, action would be fantastic, unreal and fanatical. If there were no breadth, action would degenerate into the self complacency of the Philistine, with an utter absence of tension. To be 'on the spot' - working with the eternal end in view - *that* is Christian action within the 'Calling'. (16)

SUMMARY

We have cited only a few of Brunner's particular emphases, but they are, it is argued, sufficient to show that he has an original and valuable contribution to make to the debate. He has vigorously re-appraised Luther and clarified many of the misunderstandings that have arisen in Protestant circles. His particular strengths are his insistence that ethics belongs at the heart of theology, and that it comprises a vital element in our understanding of the nature of God. Also we must cite his emphasis on the importance of the individual. In so doing, he has elevated man to the level of an heir of God, and not merely a creature. The Divine-Human Encounter is vital not only to man, but also to God, and within it comes the ethical response.

I believe that it is fitting in this summary to comment on Brunner's 'style'. Mention was made in the first chapter about the contrast between him and Barth. The quotations from The Divine Imperative which we have

noted suggest a very fine literary style and also point to a very strong sense of reverence, awe and wonder. One cannot escape the conclusion that Brunner writes, not merely employing his scholarship and intellect, but also his personal convictions. Both his style and his personal history, which show intimate knowledge of the Church at every level, convince us that we are dealing with more than just a theologian. His subject matter is not just something he examined and analysed, but is also his personal conviction. This is another justification for a comparison between him and Niebuhr. Niebuhr similarly demonstrated personal involvement in his subject matter and was a most enthusiastic proclaimer, both in the spoken and the written word, of his convictions. It was this that made Brunner describe him as a 'volcano', and it was Brunner's convictions that led Niebuhr willingly to identify himself with so much of what he wrote and said. In concentrating on ethics as a major study, both men thought out their theology in a world context. They were able, more than most, to explore the dialectic of 'being like Christ', and knowing that it is impossible.

- 1) Paul Tillich: "Some questions on Brunner's Epistemology". *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, Eds Kegley & Bretall LLT p' 99.
- 2) Emil Brunner. *Man in Revolt* p 11
- 3) Cornelius Van Til *The New Modernism* p 246
- 4) See Chapter 1
- 5) Emil Brunner. *God and Man* p149
- 6) Emil Brunner. *Wahreit als Begegnung* p141
- 7) Emil Brunner *Mysticism and the Word*.
- 8) Emil Brunner *Dogmatics* ii p62
- 9) *ibid* p65
- 10) *ibid*" p65
- 11) The Divine Imperative p198
- 12) *ibid* p198
- 13) *ibid* p199
- 14) *ibid* p200
- 15) *ibid* p206

CHAPTER 5 THE PARTICULAR EMPHASES OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR: A POLITICAL
AND THEOLOGICAL PILGRIMAGE

We noticed in the first chapter of this thesis that Niebuhr's thinking was described as "organic" rather than "systematic". We noticed that he was captive to no particular school of theology, and that he adapted himself to the rapidly changing world scene. It is, therefore, more difficult to identify the particularities of Niebuhr's work than it is to identify those of Emil Brunner. Brunner was more consciously a systematic theologian whose ethical studies lay at the heart of his theological thinking. While maintaining a radical position which lay between the extremities of Barthianism and Thomism, nevertheless he was more satisfied with his Lutheran heritage than was Niebuhr. Further, Niebuhr addressed himself directly to the politicians, industrialists and power groups of his day. In this, his writings were prolific, and although his claim was that theology and Christian insights are essential in the formulating of a coherent and practical political and social philosophy, yet his impact on the political world was, arguably, greater than that of any churchman of this century. The nearest parallel is probably William Temple. In this part of the thesis we shall attempt to explain the reasons for his influence, which is remarkable when one considers the conscious secularism and the idealised liberalism that were constituent parts of the "American Dream".

We are dealing here with only one of the many aspects of Niebuhr's work. There are compelling arguments for choosing other particularities, such as his view of history, the flux of time, his existential insights, his doctrine of the nature of man and so on. However here, we confine ourselves to a brief examination of his political influence, and our study will be based on essays and lectures published as *The Church and the Modern World*.

NIEBUHR'S POLITICAL PILGRIMAGE

Although it would be impossible to determine the particular events which changed Niebuhr's thinking, it is true to say that there are at least three

distinct stages of his political philosophy, each merging imperceptibly into its successor, which justify the sub-title "Pilgrimage".

Much of his early writings can be termed "pre-theological". It was not until the middle of the nineteen thirties that Niebuhr wrote explicit theology, as opposed to political, social and philosophical works with Christian insights. It would be wrong to underestimate the theological perceptions of these early works - but the theology was more implicit than explicit. In his pre-theological works, Niebuhr identified himself with the conventional 'liberalism' of American society. During the years of his pastorate in Detroit where he witnessed and commented on the exploitation of the labouring classes in the industrial system, he accepted many of the liberal presuppositions of his generation. Their emphasis on support for the League of Nations, racial tolerance and sympathy for the labour unions coincided with his own. Mention was made in the first chapter of this thesis of these views, which are vividly recorded in his *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. A major theme of this book is his criticism of Protestantism on the basis that it emphasised the metaphysical at the expense of social ethics.

'Sermon after sermon, speech after speech is based on the assumption that the people of the Church are committed to the ethical ideals of Jesus and that they are the sole - or at least the chief - agents of redemption energy in society. It is very difficult to persuade people who are committed to a general ideal to consider the meaning of that ideal in specific situations' (1)

As an example of his identification with liberal presuppositions we can quote from the same work.

'Look at the industrial enterprise anywhere and you find criminal indifference on the part of the strong to the fate of the weak. The lust for power and greed got gain are the dominant note in business. An industrial overlord will not share his power with the workers until he is forced to do so by tremendous pressure.' (2)

This stage of Niebuhr's thinking culminated in the publication in 1932 of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and, in 1934, of *Reflections on the End of an Era*. By this time he had virtually abandoned his liberal views and for a time looked towards Marxism as a more attractive option. It was not until 1935 that Niebuhr started to write serious theology and by then his concept of the transcendent, and of revelation, the nature of man, grace and redemption were demonstrated as answers to the many questions raised in his earlier writings. However, until then, Niebuhr can be described as a political theologian progressing from one set of presuppositions to another. His preoccupation with justice and equality naturally led him to contemporary political ideals, and it is worth remarking that in the West many of the intelligentsia and, indeed, many of the senior politicians of the post war era courted Marxism in the nineteen thirties.

We shall at this stage briefly isolate the main theses of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and of *Reflections*, and we shall attempt to demonstrate how Niebuhr moved from there to the end of the decade when, just before the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 he delivered the Gifford Lectures which were to be published as The Nature and Destiny of Man. It is worth recording that as early as 1929 Niebuhr expressed his doubts about liberal tenets, and in 1936 in his journal he enumerated specifically six articles of the liberal creed which, he said, blinded it to the world. These were:

1. Injustice is caused by ignorance and will yield to education and greater intelligence.
2. Civilisation is becoming gradually more moral.
3. The character of individuals, not social systems, will guarantee justice.
4. Appeals to brotherhood and good will are bound to be effective in the end, and if they have been ineffective to date, we need only more and better appeals.

5. Goodness makes for happiness, and increased knowledge of this will overcome human selfishness.

6. War is stupid and will yield to reason. (3)

This represents Niebuhr's most concrete rejection of liberalism, although there were other creeds to reject before he set about the theological examination of the Nature of Man. From what we have learned about Emil Brunner, there is no doubt that he would have rejected this liberalism equally forcefully. Essentially, liberalism, as represented in these propositions is an Aristotelean viewpoint. The emphasis on 'reason', and the achievement of 'goodness' are precisely those categories that offended against Brunner's and Niebuhr's conception of the source of a Christian ethic.

MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY

This is the book which has become, perhaps, Niebuhr's most famous, and which influenced many western political leaders. The most celebrated thesis of the book is that "the group is less moral than the individual", which militated against prevailing liberal optimism. However, the other theses are equally important and represent much of Niebuhr's total view of the nature of man. Consistent with his dialectic emphasis, Niebuhr, in this book, isolates three 'ambiguities' in addition to the question of man and society.

The first is the ambiguity of power. The political debate is, he says, more about a contest for power than about theories. The argument represents a clash of wills rather than a clash of minds. A recurring theme is that nobody willingly relinquishes power, and, therefore, the political system is dominated by the interest of groups - largely economic groups. This, in turn, gives rise to injustice, because predominant power groups appropriate rewards and privileges to themselves. Unequal power gives rise to unequal justice. However, power, Niebuhr argues, is not intrinsically evil. Indeed it is necessary to establish unity and order in a community and also to effect social change and thus to achieve a more tolerable

justice. He condemns the hypocrisy of those who condemn power which is achieved by revolutionary means, while at the same time implicitly supporting the power which keeps their privileges intact. Niebuhr thus defends the possibility of legitimate revolution in the interests of justice. He used a similar argument later to justify the use of force against fascism.

The second thesis is the ambiguity of reason. This, like power, is capable of both positive and negative applications. On the one hand, reason is that which, in man, is the central principle of human creativity, morality and hope. Man can, by reason, study his own nature, and can fear his own mortality. On the other hand, far from being a noble gift in the Aristotelean manner, Niebuhr sees it as that which unjustly rationalises dubious actions in pursuit of its own interests.

The very forces which lift man above nature, give natural impulses a new and more awful potency in the human world. Man fights his battles with instruments in which the mind has sharpened nature's claws. (4)

It is at this point that Niebuhr sowed the seeds for his later and more fundamental theological thinking. Man's awareness of himself generates the will for power, and from there the subsequent idolatry of 'self', the group that he terms 'pride', and that which constitutes the major ingredient of social sin. Niebuhr's political philosophy is now merging into a form of theology which embraces the subject matter of Christian social ethics.

The third ambiguity is that of religion, which at this stage of his thinking lacked the concept of a response to Divine presence and revelation - a major thesis in his work *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Here he describes religion as a "sense of the absolute", almost defining it as a human projection. Ambiguity arises from the fact that it is difficult in an enlightened society to project religious ethics which will affect social structures and institutions from a base where the source of the ethic is 'personal'. Modern man, in spite of his ethical sensitivity, finds difficulty in coping with this category, and sees religious morality as essentially 'personal'. This is something of a blow to those Christian

moralists who, recognising the undoubted moral resources of religion, hope to demonstrate that here are the resources for social redemption. But if this demonstration is unqualified, then modern man will be scornful about something which he sees as not relevant to the urgent political and economic tensions of the day.

'There are constitutional limitations in the genius of religion which will always make it more fruitful in purifying individual life, and adding wholesomeness to the more intimate social relations, such as the family, than in the problems of the more complex and political relations of modern society. The disrepute in which modern religion is held by large numbers of ethically sensitive individuals, springs much more from its difficulties in dealing with these complex problems than from its tardiness in adjusting itself to the spirit of modern culture. A society that is harassed with urgent political and economic problems is inclined to be scornful of any life-expression which is not immediately relevant. (6)

This leads to a reflection on the dialectic of transcendence and immanence, which became fundamental for Niebuhr's later interpretation of revelation, judgement and grace.

The theme of the immorality of groups runs throughout the book and is explicit in the title. The distinction between 'individual' and 'group' virtue is one that Niebuhr liked to emphasise in order to counter optimistic liberal views about collective behaviour. His thesis therefore is that there is no self-transcending consciousness in a group, and the 'ruling clique' or 'oligarchy' does not represent the whole in self-awareness - but only one faction of it. Further, each individual conscience sees itself as 'moral' when it subordinates itself to the interests of the larger group. Therefore, the individual can be cajoled into subordination and can unwittingly contribute to the hypocrisy and egotism of the group. It is worth quoting Langdon Gilkey on this particular point.

Groups therefore claim to represent universal values, and thus can they keep the moral assent as well as the egoistic devotion of their members. Needless to say, this analysis of egoism, universal claims and hypocrisy laid the foundation for the later categories of idolatry and self-deception so crucial to Niebuhr's theological interpretation of sin, an interpretation which included both individual and corporate human existence. Here, however, this analysis is largely confined to his description of nations and of privileged classes (7)

It is clear that Niebuhr is referring here not to nations, but to classes, and, like Marx, he concludes that economic power is central to social power, and this in turn leads him to analyse the solution in Marxist terms. The communist oligarch is seen as less of a menace than the capitalist oligarch since he possesses only political power, whereas the capitalist oligarch possesses both political and economic power. Niebuhr seems at this stage to be saying that in spite of the many errors in Marxism, it is a social philosophy that a Christian social ethic must fully take into account.

On the question of the relationship of power to justice Niebuhr has this to say.

Only the Marxian proletarian has seen this problem with perfect clarity. If he makes mistakes in choosing the means of accomplishing his ends, he has made no mistake either in stating the rational goal toward which society must move, the goal of equal justice, or in understanding the economic foundations of justice. If his cynicism in the choice of means is at times the basis of his undoing, his realism in implementing ethical ideals with political and economic methods is the reason for his social significance. (8)

However, in spite of his apparent approval of Marxism - and this is brought about as much as anything by his natural 'tilt' towards the poor- Niebuhr dismisses it as the ultimate answer. The powerfulness of his dismissal is grounded in the substance of his criticism. He does not say that Marxism

is wrong because it is merely social, and lacks religion, but because, on the contrary, it is fundamentally a religion.

It is more than a doctrine. It is a dramatic, and to degree, a religious interpretation of proletarian destiny". (9)

He expands this point in *Reflections*, published the following year. Here he says:

It, (Marxism) detests Christianity with all the hatred of one religion for a rival, and of irreligion for religion. (10)

As the nineteen thirties progressed, this was to become a developing theme for Niebuhr. He saw Marxism as being based on a myth held in faith, and thus, like all religions, ambiguous because of its lack of self-criticism. Its dogmatism ignores the dangers of political power, and because it is saturated with many illusions, not unlike the liberal ideal, and because it is obsessed with the claims and prejudices of its own class, then it has no pity for, or understanding of, other groups and classes. This thinking led him to dismiss Marxism in the end as 'Moral utopianism', and by the end of the decade he ranked it, along with fascism, as a dangerous and destructive creed - the one 'utopian' and the other 'cynical'.

REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF AN ERA

Many of the themes in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* are continued in this work and expanded. The thesis of the conflict of interest and of power, and the thesis that reason, in his words, "is the servant of impulse before it is its master" (11) as well as the thesis that in collective behaviour reason serves largely to rationalise group egotism, are all developed. However, Niebuhr enters into the field of the philosophy of history, and even makes predictions based on historical evidence. For example, he predicted that the rise of fascism would lead to a victory for socialism throughout the west. He saw fascism as a desperate attempt by the capitalists of the world to woo the workers away from communist ideals, and

therefore as another example of the way in which those who hold power will use all means to preserve it. Throughout the book there is a foreboding of tragedy. The movements both on the left and on the right are reduced in Niebuhr's thought to being struggles either for power, or for the retention of power. No social or political system exists which is able to contain this process, and he finds all the accepted solutions as inadequate.

'With rather pathetic irony, modern civilisation proceeded to tear itself asunder in its conflicts between nations and classes, while modern culture dreamed of perpetual peace'. (12)

Reflections can be seen as that work of Niebuhr's which provoked his deeper theological thinking. It is greatly to his credit both as a man, and also as a serious theologian that he deeply concerned himself with all social, political and philosophical theories before his theology opened the way to a more satisfactory answer. It cannot be said of Niebuhr that he was in any way 'obscurantist'. He argued from strength and he claimed that his theological writings appeared in order to make sense of the confusions and irrationalities of common experience - confusions which the categories of liberal theory were quite unable to handle. It is after this that he began to use theological symbols, and his developed thought represented a correlation between the 'facts of experience' and the cohering power of theological symbols. It is therefore at this point of his 'pilgrimage' that Niebuhr moves towards systematic theology. But it is worthy of comment that his pre-theological works have survived and are still current. Even standing on their own they have deep significance, if only because they raised questions and isolated dilemmas that are still recognisable. But it is the understanding of the nature of man, the reality of sin, redemption, grace and revelation, that makes sense of these dilemmas. Christian Social Ethics must cope with acknowledging the problems as well as with suggesting a solution.

THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

We have seen that Niebuhr's writings were prolific, and any attempt to trace his theological development as it affected his political philosophy necessarily implies a selective process. We shall see his distinctive emphases if we focus on theological response to Marxism and liberalism, his doctrine of the nature of man, and his views on the correct responses of the church. However, with his abandonment of liberalism and Marxism in the middle of the nineteen thirties it is possible to see the alternatives which he projected by studying parts of his major work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. In 1939 Niebuhr had come to a systematic approach to the study of the nature of man. The theme was expounded in other journals and addresses which he gave, and we shall also look at essays and addresses that he delivered in the immediate post war period, when the tragic events of that confrontation made him far more positive in his rejection of political solutions.

Although we have seen that Niebuhr displayed some sympathy for Marxism as an alternative to liberalism it proved to be a transient ally. No doubt his 'tilt towards the poor' motivated this attraction, but his rejection of it was on philosophical grounds and, later, on historical grounds. It is important to note the historical context of his thought. In the nineteen thirties the deep economic depression cast a shadow over the western world and capitalism was seen as being 'played out', with Marxism in the wings as a credible alternative. This was the period of Roosevelt's New Deal which Niebuhr criticised as being insufficiently radical - perhaps not taking into account the pragmatism required of a politician to effect even that much reform.

To deal with his philosophical, and, indeed, theological criticism of Marxism we can go back as far as 1935. In his journal "Radical Religion", Vol 1 (1935) he deals with the danger of an unreserved acceptance of Marxism on the grounds that it lacks the dialectic between nature and spirit and between freedom and necessity. The article is addressed to church pastors,, many of whom had strong Marxist sympathies.

In one's reaction to the sentimentalities of liberalism one should not not capitulate to Marxist dogma lest we find that liberal faith of a not very unique Christian quality is being supplanted by a radical faith, more realistic in its analysis of immediate social issues, but even less Christian in its total insights into life.

In the same article he examines the nature of the struggle for power in societies and comments that the Marxist illusion results from equating class conflict with human rivalry, whereas the truth is that the struggle for power endlessly elaborates itself as a expression of human finitude and sin. He later commented on the theory that classnessness would eliminate the problem of power, by describing this as a hopeless Utopianism.

Historically his criticism was supported by his observations. Here he commented unfavorably about the Russian experiment.

'Marxism's notion that evil would disappear once capitalism is destroyed is just as completely negated by the facts in Russia, as the liberal notion that education can lift men completely out of their economic circumstances and prompt them to act as discarnate spirits, filled with goodwill alone, is negated in our own society'. 14

During all this period the one strand of thought which ran through the pragmatic phases and continued into his mature theological phase was his awareness of the need to formulate a doctrine of the nature of man. In the early nineteen thirties Niebuhr acted as a penetrating critic of the current views and cultures. This somewhat negative criticism in his works was countered by 1939 when a more positive alternative was offered, culminating in the publication of The Nature and Destiny of Man.

In 1939 he wrote in his journal:

'Is it possible to lead man out of social confusion into an ordered society if we do not know man a little better than either Marxians or liberals know him?' (15)

And he began his Gifford Lectures in the spring of 1939 under the shadow of European war clouds with these words:

Man has always been his most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself? (16)

The study continues with alternative possibilities, and reveals the contradictions inherent in any incomplete answer. For example, if man is unique and rational, then his greed and lust for power betray him. If man is merely the product of nature, and is unable to rise above circumstances, then this tells us nothing of man as a creature who seeks out God and who dreams of making himself like God. If man is essentially good, and all evil is due to concrete historical and social causes, then these causes are revealed on closer scrutiny to be the result of the inherent evil in men. Niebuhr is saying that theories about the nature of man which emphasise either his dignity or his misery, fail to do justice to the dualism within the nature of man.

The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic forms, allowing them some, but not too much, latitude. The other less obvious fact is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world. (17)

Early in this work Niebuhr expresses his impatience with the classical view of man that stresses the power of reason, that reason is to be separated from body, that reason is creative and that it can subdue man's evil impulses. He argues that reason has been corrupted in the Fall and that it guides men towards evil impulses. He describes as an illusion the theory that there is an ethical dualism which implies that by reason alone man can transcend his selfish nature. He describes the liberal over-emphasis on man's creative potentialities, at the expense of man's destructiveness, as the "triumph of the modern classical view of man". (18)

It should be stated here that 'modern' classicism in this sense lacks the awareness of human tragedy which was a factor of Greek drama and which represented an awareness of evil even if there was no awareness of a solution.

Niebuhr's positive alternative is that man is a unique mixture of spirit and nature, that he is in nature and that he transcends nature. This is the clue to the mystery of human personality. The spirit is limited by nature and is spiritualised. The human spirit reflects the image of God and stands outside the self and the world in its capacity for self-transcendence.

"To understand himself, man must begin with a faith that he is understood from beyond himself, that he is known and loved of God and must find himself in terms of obedience to the divine will". (19)

Now this 'high' estimate of human nature and human personality must be contrasted with the pessimism about human nature present in most Christian writing - from Paul onwards. Here the thrust of the argument is that man is a sinner, not because he is finite, or physical, or because his impulses are evil, but because he refuses to accept the role of 'creatureliness'. It is not so much a question of a rebellion between mind and spirit as a rebellion against God and a wrong use of freedom.

"Man is a sinner because he is betrayed by his very ability to survey the whole to imagine himself the whole". (20)

Again:

The freedom of his spirit causes him to break the harmonies of nature and the pride of spirit prevents him from establishing a new harmony. The freedom of his spirit enables him to use the forces and processes of nature creatively; but his failure to observe the limits of his finite existence causes him to defy the restraints of both nature and reason. (21)

Niebuhr is here outlining his thesis which consists of an examination into the ambiguities of the dialectic of spirit and nature, and of freedom and finiteness. The resulting anxiety can rarely be overcome by a total faith, and so man attempts to resolve his anxiety by recourse to his own deeds thus pretending to be self-sufficient and triumphing over finiteness and human limitations. This is the essence of sin - and this is the common lot of mankind.

Niebuhr examines the solution in terms of redemption and grace, but in an examination of the nature of man as it affects his political philosophy it is necessary to isolate what Niebuhr calls man's 'will to power' which takes the form, not merely of physical dominance and survival, but of the need for social prestige and recognition. His will to power rises above nature to the realm of man's spirit and becomes insatiable and limitless. Man is more than a physical creature, and his desire is for more than physical power. He then says that the tragic paradox is that when man has achieved political power it is never a guarantee of the security which he seeks.

"The more man establishes himself in power and glory, the greater is the fear of tumbling from his eminence. The will to power is thus an expression of insecurity even when it has achieved ends which would seem to guarantee complete security. The fact that human ambitions know no limits must therefore be attributed to an uneasy recognition of man's finiteness, weakness and dependence, which become the more apparent the more we seek to obscure them. There is no level of greatness and power in which the lash of fear is not at least one strand in the whip of ambition." (22)

Thus we have come to a point where Niebuhr asserts a positive Christian position in the political debate. The dilemma of groups and of nations is directly related to the ambiguity within the Christian definition of the nature of man. The ambiguity consists of the relation of nature to spirit, of finiteness to the capacity for transcendence within man. The emergence

of power groups leads to corruption because groups reflect the egoism inherent in the nature of man, which in turn arises from the failure of man to accept his creatureliness. The solution therefore lies in the redemption of man's nature. This logical sequence is robbed of any hints of oversimplification by the extent to which Niebuhr studied man, both as an individual and in groups, to isolate the realities both in personal behaviour and in political realities. In other words, his theology arose from extensive studies of the dilemma.

This was the theme that characterised his mature theological writings and which was underlined and elaborated after World War 2. An example of this is an address he delivered in 1948 at the first world assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam entitled "The Christian Witness in the Social and National Order."

Delivered in the immediate aftermath of the 1939 -1945 tragedy, Niebuhr drew on his analysis of political alternatives to challenge the Church into action. He described the secular substitutes for the Christian faith as destroying the sense of divine sovereignty and offering redemption of society without the need for repentance. He again isolated 'liberalism' and 'Marxism' as culprits. Liberalism presented a view of man in which the concept of sinfulness is outmoded and replaced by a harmless egotism. The Marxist rebellion against the liberal culture he described as being even more erroneous and illusory. He blamed the corporate self-righteousness of these two movements for the tragedy of war.

The vaunted virtues of each side are vices from the standpoint of the other side, and sins in the sight of God. The words of the Psalmist fit our situation exactly: 'The Heavens have raged and the people have imagined a vain thing. But He who sitteth in the Heavens shall laugh' (Ps 2) God's derisive laughter is the justified divine judgement on the new and yet very old pride of modern man . (23)

Niebuhr proceeds in this address to point out the areas where the Church has responded incorrectly to this dilemma. They are four in number.

First, he maintains that there is no form of injustice, either feudal or capitalist which has not at some time been sanctified by religious sentiment and therefore rendered more impervious to change.

Secondly, a part of the church has feared involvement in the ambiguities of politics and declared them to be irrelevant to the Christian life. It has therefore abandoned mankind to its own destructive forces.

Thirdly, he accuses part of the church of retreating into unhelpful sentimentality by insisting that the law of love is a simple possibility - whereas the reality is that men find it very hard to love one another - even within the churches.

Fourthly, and most pointedly he accuses part of the church of retreating into a rigid legalism which he describes as 'graceless'. He points out that the elaborate schemes for establishing a legal framework for justice and mercy have in themselves become instruments of sin. This is a polemic against the classical natural law theories still prevailing in many parts of the Church.

It is in the course of this address that Niebuhr most succinctly describes the process of redemption which alone is the answer to the tragedies of modern man. Having stressed the negative aspects of the role of the church he moves to the substance of redemption.

The situation in the collective life of mankind today is that we have made a shipwreck of our common life through the new powers and freedom which a technical civilisation has placed at our disposal....It is the death which has followed on a vainglorious life of the nations. Without faith it is nothing but death. Without faith it generates despair. Without faith this confusion is the mark of the meaninglessness which follows the destruction of the simple system of life's meaning which we have had ourselves, our nation, and our culture at its centre. It is by faith in the God revealed in One who died and rose again that death can become the basis for a new life, that meaninglessness turns into meaning, that judgment is experienced as

grace. Our business is to mediate the divine judgment and grace, that nations, classes, states and cultures, as well as individuals, may discern the divine author of their wounds, that they may also know the possibility of a new and whole life' (24)

Niebuhr is here speaking as a mature theologian, an informed political analyst, a student of history and, as we have commented before, as a distinguished churchman.

One distinctive feature of Niebuhr's contribution to the debate about God and the World, or the Church and Politics is that he spoke with a knowledge of both. His theological insights were formidable, and perhaps no theologian of the twentieth century concerned himself as much as he did with the political realities around him and beyond him. For this reason alone - and for other reasons, Niebuhr deserves attention. Many of the movements that he experienced before the war and since are those which have influenced our own society, and in dealing with the questions which arise when we consider the relation of the Gospel to the world, or the formulating of a social and political ethic, can be tackled using the resources which Reinhold Niebuhr has bequeathed to us.

- 1) *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* p. 62
- 2) *Ibid.* p 76
- 3) *Radical Religion* Vol 1 No 4 1936
- 4) *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) p 44
- 5) *Ibid* p 52
- 6) *Ibid* p 63
- 7) *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of our Time* (Ed Harries) p 163
- 8) *Moral Man and Immoral Society* p 164
- 9) *Ibid* p 154
- 10) *Reflections on the end of an Era* (1934) p 193
- 11) *Ibid* p 17
- 12) *Ibid* p 14
- 13) *Radical Religion* Vol 4 No1 p 3
- 14) *Ibid* Vol 4 No 2 p 8
- 15) *Ibid*
- 16) *The Nature and Destiny of Man* p1
- 17) *Ibid* p 3
- 18) *Ibid* p 5
- 19) *Ibid* p 15
- 20) *Ibid* p 17
- 21) *Ibid* p 17
- 22) *Ibid* p 193
- 23) 'Christian Witness in the Social and National Order'. Published in
"The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, Ed McAfee Brown (1986) p 95
- 23) *Ibid* p 97

CHAPTER 6THE STATE:

So far, this thesis has attempted to describe the underlying theological and philosophical processes which have guided both Brunner and Niebuhr in their establishing of a Protestant Christian ethic. It has been a question of ascertaining the foundations of their thought. In doing this, we have briefly explored alternative ethical theories, and we have noticed how some traditions within Christianity have employed philosophical processes other than those which are specifically the product of biblical, and, in particular, New Testament insights.

This has included, in particular, the examination of traditional Natural Law theories, which owe much to Stoic tradition. We have also looked at more contemporary ideas - such as thorough going existentialism. We have noted that the principal issue is the relationship of the concept of 'reason', on the one hand, and 'revelation' on the other. We have also examined the concept of 'love', as the ultimate Christian determinant. Note has been taken of the debate which exists within the concept of revelation - that is, the debate about the existence of general revelation as well as special revelation. Finally, we have tried to take note of the contrast between Brunner and Niebuhr in the light of their very different geographical and political circumstances.

Nevertheless, there has been until now considerable agreement between them. They both steer a course between Thomism, and the associated concepts of casuistry and natural law, and the thorough - going Barthian emphasis on Justification by Faith alone. There is warrant for claiming that while taking account of historical factors, with acknowledged flux and change, they have broadly been faithful to the Pauline, Augustinian and Lutheran line of tradition. It is for this reason that this thesis is aimed at demonstrating that the contribution of these two to the ethical debate within Christianity is valuable, and that it is as faithful to both historic tradition and contemporary circumstances as is possible.

The thesis now aims to demonstrate how the principles which have been ascertained are applied in practice by Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Ethics, by definition, has practical application, both in the sphere of personal morality and in the sphere of social and political institutions. Niebuhr and Brunner were both prolific writers and both wrote about many different social and personal ethical issues. We clearly cannot deal with all of them, and what follows are examples of their practical application of moral principles to particular issues. In this chapter, we shall see what both had to say about the application of Christian ethics to the concept of the State. We shall see how both of them define the concept of 'state', and what ethical principles underlie the various ideals and realities. The word 'ideal' is used here to describe the theory that any moral philosopher, Christian ethicist, or political philosopher will suggest an 'ideal' form of state. As we explained in the first chapter, this exploration will, for reasons of space, be confined to a descriptive exercise, as opposed to a critical exercise.

BRUNNER ON 'THE STATE':

Brunner recognises the problem very clearly when he deals with this particular subject. In his work *Justice and the Social Order* he divides the book into two parts. The first deals with the establishing of principles relating to the concept of justice. The second part deals with their practical application. In the opening words of the second part he has this to say:

To ascertain principles is not the same thing as to apply them in practice. In this second part we are confronted with the multitudinousness of facts. Facts are not only multitudinous, but they are also complex, and multitudinousness and complexity make it impossible to define a single and convincing method of application even for principles which have been clearly and securely established

(1)

He even suggests in this section that it would be better for another discipline, other than theology, to apply these principles. However there is, as he admits, no discipline, sociological, political, or philosophical

which could on its own embrace the particularities of the Christian categories which prompt these theories. He therefore admits that ethical conclusions on practical issues are by definition 'tentative'. Brunner's recognition of this situation stems any criticism that he may be 'obscurantist', in the way that Niebuhr described those who ignored disciplines other than theology, and which we examined in the first chapter.

Only the order of God is infallible. Even human knowledge of the divine order is subject to error. How much more so its applications to the particular problems of the social order' (2)

Brunner then bases his subsequent theories about the state on this concept of 'order' - or 'call'. He uses the word 'order' here, not as in his concept of 'orders in creation', the Lutheran idea which we examined in the chapter on Natural Law, but as in his concept of the divine 'order', or 'call', which precedes all religious experience. It is this concept of 'the Call' which we examined in chapter 4 in the section devoted to Brunner's particular emphases. This is significant for two reasons. First, Brunner is demonstrating how basic theological concepts are at the heart of any formulation of ethical principles and practices. And secondly, remembering his emphasis on the 'personal' and the 'individual', he uses these concepts as valuable, indeed essential, weapons against totalitarianism. The argument runs thus.

God calls man by name as an individual. This is the only infallible principle. Only the individual can hear the call of God, and only the individual is 'responsible' - or 'answerable'. Bearing in mind, then, the infallibility of the call of God, and bearing in mind the individuality of it from the human point of view, Brunner argues that to talk seriously about 'collective persons' is the way to the establishing of a totalitarian state. We should remember here that Brunner experienced totalitarianism in Europe in its most demonic form.

He points out that totalitarianism reminds us that there is a just and an unjust order of the state itself. The centralising of totalitarian power involves the absorbing of all other rights and institutions.

Totalitarianism means that organisation is imposed from above. He argues that the best form of state is that which is built up from below. He invokes a New Testament principle that institutions exist for man and not man for institutions.

Already we can see that Brunner is not falling into the trap of identifying the state with an 'order of creation'. He is already taking into account the truth that the state can be just or unjust. The invocation of Paul to 'honour the powers that be', does not, for Brunner, mean a blind acceptance of the rightness of any existing form of state. He argues this point in his Gifford Lectures given at St Andrews in 1948, and published in two volumes as *Christianity and Civilisation*. Writing about 'power' as a means of enforcing law and guaranteeing justice and freedom, he makes the point that human power and sovereignty is limited by the power and sovereignty of God. Also, he argues that the Christian conception of sin reveals the dangers inherent in power. Power is misused whenever it is used against the law of God, and contrary to His purposes.

When St Paul deduces the power of the state from divine order and enjoins Christians to obey it, he is not thinking of the absolute sovereignty of state or monarch. The divine origin of the power of the state (*exousia*) is at the same time divine limitation. According to Paul, this limitation is given with the purpose of the state, which is peace and justice. (3)

Using the concept of the 'call', Brunner proceeds in this work to develop its application to the concept of a just state.

The individual is of the essence - but he conceded that individualism finds its own limitations. The individual is called to fellowship.

He is called by love to love. (4)

So existence in fellowship is based on man's relation to God. It is an implication of the Christian doctrine of the creation of man. However, man

in institutions becomes 'man in his place'. He then, in this passage lists the 'places' where man finds himself in fellowship.

The first, and most important is in marriage. Secondly, in the family, and then the community. He regards the gregariousness of man in his social and intellectual and recreational life as significant as an example of man, as an individual responding to God's call, being in his place in fellowship and community. Beyond all these is the 'state'. This is the last place where man finds himself.

The 'state' exists to perform that which cannot be performed by the family, the local community or by a circle of friends. For example, the state provides education to the extent that the family cannot provide it. The State supplements what the family should do. Similarly, Brunner acknowledges that the state has a responsibility for the welfare of children, but this is only as a last resort. Before the state, there is a host of communities, and intellectual intercourse, which act as resources for man to live his life in fellowship.

He comments on this point on Aristotle's description of man.

Aristotle's description of man as '*zoion politicon*' should be '*zoion koinonicon*' - 'a being pre-destined for community' . (5)

Applying this principle to definite functions of the state, Brunner argues that justice is antecedent to the state.

As the individual is antecedent to marriage and the family, the family to the community and the manifold communal forms of economic, social and intellectual life - all these things are antecedent to the state, and the manner of their organisation are prior to the law of the state. (6)

Given these premises - those of 'person', individuality, the 'call' and the subordination of the state to the individual - it is interesting to see the form that the state should take which, according to Brunner, is the

most consistent with the ethical principle. If totalitarianism, with its habit of imposing power from above is the worst that can be devised, then the bulwark against it is not democracy, but 'federalism'. Federalism is an example of a state, built up from below. As part of its definition, federalism implies the independence of those who join it, and that the whole which is formed never absorbs all the rights of the parts. Here Brunner quotes Rousseau in support of him. Federalism, he says, is always the negation of

l'aliénation totale de chaque associé de tous ses droits à toute la communauté (7)

The idea is that this union of parts which are and which remain independent makes the supreme welfare of the whole, and an otherwise unattainable wealth of community, possible.

We Swiss can best define federalism by our national existence, which is unparalleled in the European world of states, not by reason of its democracy, but by reason of its federalism (8)

Brunner uses a similar argument to confront the economic and industrial situation. He criticises the concentration of power within society, and the fact that groups have disproportionate power economically.

The credit system, combined with industrialisation, has produced an accumulation of economic power unknown in previous times: big business, mammoth corporations controlling billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of men, capable of limiting their freedom in a large measure, dominating the economic life and welfare of whole nations, and influencing the state machinery in a dangerously high degree. By their more or less monopolistic character, they exert an almost state-like coercive power. (9)

In this, Niebuhr would agree with him. It was the substance of his criticism of the Ford Motor Company made in 1922 and quoted in the first chapter of this thesis.

It is the negation of the individual - and therefore the removal from the effect of the Divine call - which Brunner sees as dangerous in concept. The state becomes more powerful as men become more evil. The more evil men are, the more they need the state, and the more demonic is the state likely to become.

He sees the great divide of our century as the divide between totalitarianism and federalism. He does not exclude democracies from this danger. He states that many who imagine themselves to be democracies are in fact not immune from totalitarianism. Totalitarianism has nothing to do with constitutions - but with the idea of the 'omnicompetent' state - the turning of life itself into a 'state' affair.

Many of the details of Brunner's thinking can be criticised, but the idea that the state is made for man, and not man for the state, and the idea that the only infallible thing is the 'order of God', and that this is to individuals, called to live in community, is a valuable starting point.

To summarise so far, Brunner sees the best form of state to be a form of federalism. The reasons for this are that he sees federalism as a mechanism whereby the rights of its individual components are not destroyed in order to achieve the wholeness of it. It diversifies power and is therefore more likely to achieve justice, because too much power can distort justice.

.....

NIEBUHR ON 'THE STATE'

Niebuhr's contribution to this subject is, as in many other instances, not identical but complementary to Brunner's. Brunner starts with the concept

of the Divine Call, and with his emphasis on the individuality of man. Niebuhr's writing on the state - as opposed to his prolific writings on the subject of political institutions - is in the context of his exposition of the theme of "Man as Sinner". He therefore, like Brunner, emphasises the individuality of man - and then explores the distinction between the morality of man and the morality of society. Starting with his assumption that individual sin is typified by pride and egotism, and that strictly speaking only the individual is a moral agent, yet, group pride, which is to some extent an aspect of the pride of individuals, actually achieves a sort of authority over the individual and results in unconditioned demands by the group upon the individual. Thus when, for example, the state develops organs of will, it will seem to the individual to have become an independent centre of moral life, and man will be inclined to acquiesce in its claims of authority, even when these do not coincide with his own moral scruples.

This is the manner in which Niebuhr justifies the need for a distinction between individual egotism and group pride. In his examination of the nature of the state, he starts from the point of human sin. We noted his emphasis on this distinction in the previous chapter when we examined his work *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

In this section we will examine what Niebuhr had to say about the State in his work *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. We shall see how he regarded the rise of fascism, and how he interpreted the concept of 'state' as portrayed by the Old Testament prophets, by St. Paul and by Augustine.

He tackles the subject of individual and group egotism in this way:

The egotism of racial, national and socio-economic groups is most consistently expressed by the national state, because the state gives the collective impulses of the nation such instrument of power, and presents the imagination of individuals with such obvious symbols of its discreet collective identity, that the national state is most able to make absolute claims for itself, to enforce those claims by power

and to give them plausibility and credibility by the majesty and panoply of its apparatus. (11)

He then argues that in any state, obedience is prompted by both the fear of power and reverence for majesty. He claims that those who believe that government rests solely on the consent of the governed, do not take into account fully the degree to which religious reverence for majesty is implicit in this consent. This can be observed by the degree of pageantry which is present in every form of state, frequently taking on militaristic forms and culminating in the immoderate and idolatrous manifestations of the modern totalitarian state. Therefore, sinful pride and idolatrous pretension are an inevitable concomitant of the cohesion of large political groups. Niebuhr recognises that the particular features which comprise the nature of man, that is his capacity for self-transcendence and self-criticism, which we noted early in this thesis, are not possessed in the same way by the group. The state is the organ of the group's will, rather than of its self-criticism. The instrument of self-transcendence is to be found in small groups within the state. He refers to these as a 'prophetic minority.' (12)

Niebuhr then pitches the concept of the 'spiritual' nature of the majesty and panoply of state as its motivating force, against the concept of the need for survival. He concludes that both are possible. He quotes the first world war as an example of the confusion within nations as to whether they engaged in a struggle for survival or in a selfless effort to maintain transcendent and universal values. It is this confusion that can give rise to very dangerous conceptions of the state. The state can be organised in such a way as to give it a sense of infallibility, and which makes valid its claims to have authority over everybody within it because it becomes the source of morality in itself. Bearing in mind that this book was published just before the outbreak of World War 2, it is interesting to note Niebuhr's comments .

It is significant that even modern Germany, though it has constructed a primitive tribal religion which makes the power and pride of the nation a self-justifying end, nevertheless feels constrained to pretend

that its expected victory in Europe is desired as a triumph of a high type of (Aryan) culture over an allegedly inferior and decadent form of (Jewish or liberal) culture. (13)

He then argues that it is the existence of the 'spiritual' awareness of the panoply of state that makes plausible many of the claims of the state, because it embraces a value more universal than its contingent self. However, its claim that it is itself the final and ultimate value, the cause which gives human existence its meaning, is one which no individual can plausibly claim for himself. Therein lies the danger - that the state claims to be God. The collective will is imposed on the individual and it asks for the individual's unswerving loyalty, asserting that its necessities are the ultimate law of the individual's existence.

This is a perceptive comment on the existence of totalitarianism. Niebuhr lived through those times when totalitarianism took on a most dangerous form. Like Brunner, he roundly condemned it. Brunner started with the concept of the individual answerability to the 'call', and Niebuhr started with the recognition of the tension between the existence of personal morality and group morality. In his case the tension was identified as the lack of ability of the group to exercise the same self-criticism that the individual is capable of. Both start with the individual. Both acknowledge that, theologically, the establishment of a Christian ethic which can be applied to the concept of 'the state', can only be found by examining the nature of the relationship between individual man and God, and by examining the Christian perspective of the nature of man himself.

Niebuhr's particular theological interpretation of this lies, as we have said, within his view of man as sinner. This becomes clear as he comments further on the rise of fascist nationalism.

"The relation of modern fascist nationalism to the insecurity and sense of inferiority of the lower middle classes is therefore significant. but it hardly can be denied that extravagant forms of modern nationalism only accentuate a general character of group life and collective egotism; and that specific forms of inferiority feeling for which this

pride compensates only accentuate the general sense of inferiority from which all men suffer. Collective pride is thus man's last, and in some respects most pathetic, effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence. The very essence of human sin is in it. It can hardly be surprising that this form of human sin is also most fruitful of human guilt, that is of objective social and historical evil. In its whole range from pride of family to pride of nation, collective egotism and group pride are a more pregnant source of injustice and conflict than purely individual pride". (14)

It is worth comment here that Niebuhr, we remember, wrote this in America, far removed from the actual scene of European conflict. This makes his words even more telling, since in the same passage, while acknowledging that there are values which transcend a nation's immediate interests and that man does not wage war merely for its own sake, yet the claims of a struggle for, say, democracy, or freedom, are more absolute than the facts warrant. In fact, he says, in spite of state-transcending altruism, the facts are that the struggle is undertaken when survival is threatened. He also claims that neutral nations are not less sinful than belligerent ones in their effort to hide their partial interests behind their devotion to 'civilisation'.

Niebuhr then turns to scripture for justification of this theory. If the collective life of man is invariably involved with the sin of pride, what did the prophets have to say about this as they delivered their message to the nation? Bearing in mind, as we have seen earlier in this thesis that God calls man individually, and that the message to the church is for the world, Niebuhr singles out the prophets as those who have heard the call of God and then share it with the nation. He quotes Amos as his first source.

Prophetic religion had its very inception in a conflict with national self-deification. Beginning with Amos, all the great Hebrew prophets challenged the simple identification between God and the nation, or the naive confidence of the nation in its exclusive relation to God. (15)

In this context he quotes Amos vii:16-17: "Hear thou the word of the Lord. Thou sayest, prophesy not against Israel, and drop not thy word against the house of Issac. Therefore, thus says the Lord, Thy wife shall be a harlot in the city, and thy sons and daughters shall fall by the sword"

The prophets claimed that judgement would overtake, not only Israel, but also every other nation, including those who were used by God to exercise His judgement - "the rod of my anger".

From this point, Niebuhr charts the fundamental difference between a Judaic and Christian approach from what he calls the simple identification of morals and principles in the thought of Plato and Aristotle. Greek philosophy, he argues, does not have a vantage point from which to criticise this particular form of human pride, because such a vantage point does not exist within man himself. The conviction that collective pride is the final form of sin is only possible within the terms of a revealed religion where the voice of God is heard above all "human majesties." In this case the divine power is revealed in a way that nations are seen as "a drop of a bucket" (Is. xl:15)

Moving to the Christian era, Augustine, using his theory of the two cities - "the city of this world" and the "city of God" - is able to view, for example, the destruction of the Roman Empire as an example of the law of life in the "city of this world". He further blames its destruction on human pride.

But because the earthly city is not a good which acquits the possessors of all troubles, therefore this city is divided in itself into wars, altercations and appetites of bloody and deadly victories.....and if it conquer it extols itself and so becomes its own destruction. (16)

Thus further evidence is provided which suggests that prophetic Christianity and a qualified Judaism are the only sources of a secure vantage point with which to oppose the self glorification of nations. It must not, however, be ignored that on many occasions Christianity has, in Niebuhr's word, played the part of Court Chaplain to the pride of nations.

Niebuhr points out that Augustine, in a very qualified manner, identified that "City of God" with the historic church, and stripped of his qualifications the church embraced that teaching and became a state in its own right, every bit as powerful and as proud as the secular state which existed either alongside it, or in opposition to it.

'The fact that human pride insinuated itself into the struggle of the Christian religion against the pride and self-will of nations proves how easily the pride of men can avail itself of the very instruments intended to mitigate it. The church, as well as the state, can become the vehicle of collective egotism. Every truth can be made the servant of sinful arrogance, including the prophetic truth that all men fall short of the truth.' (17)

So the notion of collective pride, the ultimate form of sin, is applied to the church itself. Most markedly it appears in church history where the leader of the Catholic church assumed 'kingly' roles, and also in the opposition to that where Luther dismisses the Pope as 'anti-Christ', whereas Kings rule by divine right. Protestantism, in its Lutheran interpretation, became an outlet for political arrogance within the new nation states emerging in Europe. The nation is God. And during modern history this has been a strong force for collective pride. In our century this reached new limits. Fascism in Europe arose against Christianity as well as within it. Thus the Nazis rejected Christianity because, in spite of its failings, it still was able to pass judgement on them. Thus although there are no nations that are free from pride, yet there are still some who are prepared to listen to God's judgement mediated to them through the Church. The worst feature of the totalitarian states of the west is they have have flourished within and against Christianity.

SUMMARY

To summarise Niebuhr's thinking so far one can say that the theological base for his views on the state arise from his thinking about 'man as sinner' - and the existence of collective sin and pride. Like Brunner, it

begins with the individual, but there is a greater emphasis on the notion of 'corporate' sin. Also, he uses his theory that man is self-transcendent, and that he can view himself from outside himself, examining his own motives and behaviour. To support his views he quotes the Old Testament prophets, Augustine, Luther, and his observations of the rise of totalitarianism in his generation.

The similarities between Brunner and Niebuhr here are striking. Brunner points us to the infallibility of the 'call', and Niebuhr points us to the indispensability of revelation as a means whereby man achieves a vantage point from which to mediate judgement. These are broadly very similar. Both depend upon revelation and not reason. Both start with the idea of the individual. Both share the same view of totalitarianism and both point to the same causes of it. Neither clings to a strictly Lutheran view of the state as a primordial order or to a narrow interpretation of Paul's writings on the state. Both are aware of historical developments and of the effect of the rise of dictatorships in Europe. Most importantly, both equip us with the tools to oppose unjust states and orders of community. Man in community comes after man in fellowship with God. It is from the 'personal' to the corporate that they define their ethic in relation to the nature of the state.

If the historic roots of Niebuhr's and Brunner's theological thinking are broadly similar, particularly in the concept of 'revelation' as a personal encounter, note must also be made of their differences. These lie in the question of the commitment of each of them to the whole question of 'systematic theology'. We have noted that Niebuhr expressed impatience with the concept of systematic theology, whereas Brunner is more properly described as a systematic theologian as well as a Christian ethicist. Niebuhr was passionately interested in the social and political issues of his time, and wrote a great deal about these before he turned to serious theology. Richard Kroner summarises this:

If one compares him (Niebuhr) with men like Barth and Brunner, he appears to be rooted in the present moment, while they seem to be theoretical and academic dogmatists. (18)

It is certainly true that Niebuhr is more preoccupied than Brunner with the actual mechanisms of the state - the meaning of 'power', the political realities and social institutions. But it must not be forgotten that Brunner was also much more interested in people and social institutions than were many of his contemporary continental theologians. Here, as we have noted in this thesis, the difference is one of emphasis and style, rather than fundamentally theological. The conclusion remains that in their dealing with the nature of the state, they both reach very similar conclusions, although they use a different approach. What comprises their agreement is basically their view of revelation, and, in particular, their acceptance of revelation through encounter. as well as a 'general' revelation of God in Creation.

- 1) *Justice and the Social Order.* Emil Brunner. p119
- 2) *Ibid* p 120
- 3) *Ibid* p122
- 4) *Ibid* p 127
- 5) *Christianity and Civilisation* Emil Brunner Vol 1 p118
- 6) *Justice and the Social Order* p127
- 7) Rousseau *The Social Contract* p 78
- 8) *Justice and the Social Order* p 244
- 9) *Christianity and the Social Order* Vol 1 p119
- 10) *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Reinhold Niebuhr Vol 1 p122
- 11) *Ibid* p223
- 13) *Ibid* p225
- 14) *Ibid* p226
- 15) *Ibid* p227
- 16) *De Civ Dei* XV Ch4 Augustine
- 17) *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Vol 1 p231
- 18) 'The Historical roots of Neibuhr's Thought' Richard Croner
Reinhold Niebuhr Eds Kegley and Bretall.

CHAPTER 7

THE PROBLEM OF WAR

Inherent in any definition of the "State" is an understanding of the means whereby the state defends its own existence. If a state or a nation is threatened by an outside force, then it must, if it is to continue as a state, have the means to resist that threat. This raises the question of pacifism which the Christian ethicist is obliged to face. The problem is made more difficult if we consider that war can be viewed either as a concept in itself, or as a topical issue. It is clearly inappropriate to tackle the questions raised by a historical study of medieval warfare in the same way that we would tackle the questions raised by the possibilities of a full scale nuclear war. The differences are, first, that a historical reflection does not require the same form of attention as a topical problem, and, secondly, that there is a difference of scale between the two examples that make nonsense of a common theory. It may, or may not, be true that a thorough-going, radical pacifist may view each kind of situation in exactly the same way, but it is certainly true that many, while regretting and condemning the use of force in any situation, would wish to use completely different arguments in dealing with the question of modern and nuclear war.

In this chapter, we shall again examine both Brunner's and Niebuhr's treatment of this question. In view of the command, "Thou shalt not kill", and the command, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself", it is important that we see how these two justified their "non-pacifist" views - although Niebuhr consciously rejected his early pacifist stance in a way that Brunner did not have to. We shall see how the problem of war presents itself in a way that demands a conscious choice which for a Christian has to be both theologically honest and, at the same time, pragmatic. In view of the constant use of the 'love' ethic, which is central to the church's teaching, the world has a right to question just how that permits debate at any level. As we explained in the previous chapter, this examination will of necessity be descriptive, rather than critical.

BRUNNER ON PACIFISM

Within the section entitled "The Acting Christian in the Acting State", in *The Divine Imperative*, there is a passage specifically dealing with the subject of pacifism, entitled "The Christian and Force - the Problem of War". (1) This, with the appropriate appendix, will be the principal source of this section. The dilemma is identified immediately.

"For love's sake the possession of force by the State is necessary, although, in itself, the use of force is opposed to love." (2)

Brunner then argues that, again, for love's sake' - in this instance that the existence of a State is good for the people - the reserves of force must be so great that people will feel that it not worth while their resisting it. To "moralise" the state consists in the fact that the state must keep its force 'latent', as far as is possible. In modern political terms this means that the reserves of force are for the deterrence of war and are defensive rather than offensive. Secondly, he recognises that there is an ethical difference between the use of force in the internal administration of the state - i.e. the police force, and the use of force towards the outside world - i.e. war. Thirdly, at this point, Brunner points to a need to distinguish between the aims of ethics, and of preaching or political propaganda. A further distinction, and one referred to earlier, is that between war, as an abstract, and war, as a topical problem. These four points form the basis for much of Brunner's writings on the subject of war and pacifism.

If only because of the effect of war on so many people, the problem is one of the most urgent and controversial in the whole field of ethics. Brunner carefully discusses the subject of war within the concept of the State. War, he says, supporting the aims and policies of a state, is essential to the nature of the state, provided there are no other means to protect its existence. If a state is not prepared to defend itself by force of arms, then it may just as well hand itself over to a more virile state, which, as a conqueror, will not hesitate to use violence.

To deny, on ethical grounds, this elementary right of the State to defend itself by war, simply means to deny the existence of the state itself. (3)

He describes this as the justifiable idea behind the concept of the "just war". Thus he describes pacifism of the 'absolutist' kind, as practically anarchy - an Anabaptist Utopia. He is clear, that whoever affirms the State as a necessity must also affirm war as a contingent necessity - because the force a state possesses is what alone can protect it against the force used by other states.

Brunner has made it clear, early in his treatment of the subject, that the problem of war and the nature of the state go hand in hand. What justifies the former also justifies the latter in what he describes as 'contingency'. Therefore, the call of God to live in community implies a call to defend that community.

Brunner dismisses quickly the claim that war must be condemned because it is opposed to the 'command to love' contained in the Sermon on the Mount. He says that once we appeal to the Sermon on the Mount we must reject all forms of compulsion or coercion, even that which is exercised by a police force, or is the subject of legislation brought about by political processes. He calls this pacifism, 'radical' and 'fanatical', and opposed to the entire treatise on Ethics which *The Divine Imperative* has argued.

Having dismissed this fanatical form of pacifism, Brunner proceeds to consider a second form. This brings into play the concept of the 'relative' - the 'more' or the 'less'. He quotes Heering, who in his book *The Fall of Christianity* agrees that the compulsory authority vested in the administration is a historical necessity, but that there can, within that, be a quantitative difference that can become a qualitative difference. However, Heering argues that war is such a quantum force that it can in no way be ethically justified. Brunner agrees that in the concept of the 'relative', war represents a 'more' of this kind, and therefore presents itself as a complex ethical question. But he argues that note must be taken of the resulting anarchy if 'might' is allowed to prevail.

"Where anarchy prevails, that is, where Might is right, the war of defence, as an emergency action, is the 'just' war." (4)

Brunner further argues that it is wrong to use arguments that may have been valid when applied to war in the old sense, to support pacifism which is addressed to war at the present time. Pacifism should not be presented as a response to a timeless problem but as something which should be addressed to the problem as it is today. Here, Brunner is using the realities of history as relevant issues in moral decision making. This would correspond closely with Niebuhr's continuous emphasis on the realities of history, and is a further example of Brunner's defence against the criticism made of him that he was too dependent on traditional Natural Law theories. Brunner acknowledges that there are those who apply this theory of pacifism to war as it is today, and he says that it is important not to confuse this form of pacifism with the sentimental and radical forms of pacifism which he has criticised. However he states in this passage that as Protestant and Biblical Christians, we are under the obligation of affirming the necessity of the State,

"...and with this the necessity for the compulsion exercised by the State. This deprives us of the right to appeal to the Sermon on the Mount in support of our pacifism and to estimate the wars of the past from an ethical point of view. Only so do we gain the right to oppose war at the present day with all the more energy." (5)

In examining what Brunner has to say about war as a topical problem it is important to realise that his writings here are pre-nuclear. They are, nevertheless, valid and similar to many of the things that are said about nuclear war. In the realm of the 'more' and 'less', the wars experienced by Brunner, and anticipated by him, constitute a 'more', in the way that a nuclear war constitutes a 'more'. Brunner argues that the same word should not apply to the conflicts of the past and those of the present. Factors he cites include the use of national armies instead of mercenary armies, the economic inter-dependence of states, the use of mechanical and chemical means of warfare, the threat to civilian populations, the draining of the entire social and economic life of nations. In view of all this, he

argues, it is no longer possible to talk of "winning" a war. In modern warfare, all are losers, and there is no such thing as a 'non-combatant' population. He therefore roundly condemns the use of historical example to justify war as it is today. None of the themes which could, arguably, have justified historic conflicts apply to today's war theatre.

"The development of the technique of warfare, the heightening of war's intensity, and its enormous extension has led to a point where war has become race suicide. War has outlived itself. It has become so colossal that it can no longer exercise any sensible function. To expect to establish any just order by means of a world conflagration - called war - has become political madness". (6)

This is not an argument for pacifism in the sense that Brunner does not see pacifism as a timelessly valid argument. It is rather a realistic assessment of the problem in the light of historical circumstances. So far, we have seen that the problem of war is closely identified with the concept of State, and Brunner then proceeds, in this passage, to consider alternatives to the settling of conflicts. In pursuing the argument that war, because of its heightened technology, is no longer an option, he examines alternatives and parallels. His argument proceeds thus:

There will always be conflicts between nations as long as men are still sinners. However, war can no longer be considered a way of engaging in these conflicts. The existence of human civilisation depends on the discovery of alternative means of settling conflict. Even brutal and coercive political means are not suicidal in the way that modern warfare is. From the point of view of history, every analogy that could be drawn between wars of the past, and war as a topical problem, have broken down. This is not only the result of technology, but it is also the result of the drawing together the nations of the world in ways which make the world much more of a cultural and economic unity. Therefore the nations of the world have as an objective interest the abolition of war. This interest overrides purely national interests. He cites the formation of the

European states as an example of the bringing together the people of different interests - and also he points to the painfulness of that process, which, he says, is not suicidal in the sense that modern warfare is. Theologically, Brunner reiterates the theme that there is a necessity for the most universal form of community to be inherent in the idea of the Divine creation, which lifts it far above all 'Utopian' theories.

"To work resolutely towards the formation of this unity is today the only 'practical politics' worth the name." (7)

Having acknowledged that conflict will exist between nations and communities as long as those nations and communities exist, and having ruled out war as a viable means of settling them, and also as a means without any ethical justification at all, Brunner then addresses himself to the various possibilities. He admits that we have no idea what the substitute for war will be - but he asserts that ethical reflection is needed to meet the new facts with new forms of thought. Thus he argues that if, for example, a nation were to disarm, and render itself 'defenceless', in the old meaning of that term, in order to prepare the way for a new form of 'security', such action would not be a sign of political folly, but of political wisdom, since it would demonstrate the possibility of a new way of political action. This is an argument for what today we would call unilateralism. It is based on an acknowledgement of historical facts and, what Brunner conceives as, political realism.

He further states that in the new circumstances a conscientious and sane citizen is justified in not rendering a service to the state because, in his opinion, it is a politically useless action. He describes such a person as politically wise and he describes this decision as a response to the Command of God, not in the fanatical sense, but in the concrete sense of political responsibility. Brunner is arguing that both actions - unilateral disarmament and conscientious objection - are responses to political realities, and therefore wise.

The emphasis by Brunner on the reality of the historical changes in the nature of war is the determining factor which is used to formulate his views on pacifism. He therefore examines the nature and the affect of this change.

'When a new order is coming into being, and to shake off the shackles of the old order, the idea of order itself begins to waver, and this leads to hesitation about the ethical obligation of obedience to the State. An ethical right to revolution which can be expressed in general terms, does not exist; but the necessity does arise of making a new choice between the new order which is coming into being and the old order which is falling into decay.' (8)

Brunner is careful to qualify this apparent justification of 'revolution'. But he claims that not even the Christian can evade this issue, and the 'tragedy' of creating the new order is that the old order has to be abolished. His view that it is impossible to justify revolution on ethical grounds consists of his belief that it would elevate the idea of anarchy as a principle, and in so doing, would destroy the whole basis of morality.

"But just as the duty of obedience to the State is always qualified by obedience to God's Command, so also it is qualified by the possibility that God intends to destroy the old order because it has degenerated into a sham. But only unavoidable necessity will avail to protect this dangerous action from the reproach of rebellion against God". (9)

To summarise Brunner's contribution to the subject of the problem of war, one must say that there is a noticeable degree of consistency of ideas and concepts. His view of pacifism, and, in particular, his dismissal of pacifism as a timelessly valid stance, is consistent with his view of creation. Man is created to live under God's command - and man is created to live in community. The State is a desirable form of community, extending the possibilities of the family, and it is a matter of love that the state defends its existence, by force if necessary, to repel force.

Since the State is to be desired, and consistent with Brunner's views of creation, fanatical pacifism would lead to anarchy - which is a situation of disobedience to God's command. On the other hand, war has become for a variety of reasons an unrealistic way of settling conflict, and to disarm, or to refuse to obey the command to take up arms, is to express not so much an ethical principle, but a piece of political realism and wisdom. In that sense, pacifism is defended. Note is taken of the dangers that exist when one order replaces another, but Brunner is of the opinion that whatever damage that change may cause - it is preferable to a full scale global war, which he calls 'race-suicide'. There is, in this, a fine balance between the concept of the 'orders in creation' which we examined earlier in this thesis, and the reality of history. It is a good example of the fact that a moral theologian is, by definition, concerned with the real issues of society, and uses theological categories and principles within various social and political structures.

NIEBUHR ON THE PROBLEM OF WAR _ AND PACIFISM:

The pilgrimage of Reinhold Niebuhr which we examined in a previous chapter is exemplified in his treatment of the problem of war and of pacifism. In as much as this is a specific issue with profound ethical content, Niebuhr's tendency to be more of an 'organic' than a 'systematic' theologian becomes apparent. In examining his views on this subject there is much to choose from, and here we will look at his essay on 'Pacifism' which forms part of his work *Christianity and Power Politics*, (1940).

In the same way that Niebuhr courted liberalism and Marxism in the 1930's, and then rejected them, so he courted pacifism in the 1920's. He served for a while as chairman of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. It is clear that he always respected pacifism as an ideal, and that he admired its principle of non-coercive love. But absolute pacifism he regarded in the same way as, what he describes as, the Roman Catholic view of a 'just war'.

These are, of course, very different from each other, but he suggested that both lacked the flexibility required to be useful in dealing with particular situations.

The principal theological thesis from which he starts is that the Christian Gospel cannot simply be equated with the 'law of love'. The finality of Christianity is not that it can be proved that love is more adequately revealed here than anywhere else, but that Christianity measures the totality of human existence - which includes sin as well as love. The true norm is Christ - the second Adam, and that is love. But man, in striving for self realisation is involved in making the self the true end of existence. Every man is therefore a crucifier of Christ.

"The good news of the Gospel is not the law that we ought to love one another. The good news of the gospel is that there is a resource of divine mercy which is able to overcome a contradiction within our own souls, which we cannot ourselves overcome. This contradiction is that, though we know we ought to love our neighbour as ourself, there is a 'law in our members which wars against the law that is in our mind,' so that, in fact, we love ourselves more than our neighbour." (10)

Niebuhr then examines the concept of 'grace'. It is, he says, on the one hand, the power of righteousness which heals the contradiction in our lives, and on the other hand it is 'justification' - pardon rather than power. So, in the first instance Christ defines the possibilities of human existence, and in the second instance, forgiveness is given to men, despite the fact that they can never achieve the full measure of Christ. Christ is the 'impossible possibility'. So, the doctrine of grace and justification means that Christianity sees sin as a permanent factor in human history - a doctrine which has no meaning for the secularist. But Niebuhr also quotes many modern Christians who believe that there is a simple way out of the sinfulness of human history. Those who hold that Christianity is a challenge to men to obey the law of Christ do not understand that Christianity is a religion which deals realistically with the problem presented by the violation of the Christian law. Appeals to men to obey the

law of Christ - which means to love one another - and therefore which embraces pacifism as a contradiction to the law of love, have missed the point of the Christian Gospel, that it is concerned with the acknowledgement of sin, and the realisation that the problem of achieving justice in a sinful world is a very difficult task.

In the profounder versions of the Christian faith the very utopian illusions, which are currently equated with Christianity, have been rigorously disavowed. (11)

Therefore much pacifism is in fact a heresy, since it claims to be inspired by the Christian Gospel - the part of it which contains the law of love - whereas in neglecting the doctrine of original sin, which is translated in man's efforts to evolve political strategies, it depends on a doctrine of faith in the goodness of man. This rejection of the 'pessimistic' view of human nature means a radical re-interpretation of the Christian faith. Niebuhr writes thus:

They have reinterpreted the Cross so that it is made to stand for the absurd idea that perfect love is guaranteed a simple victory over the world, and have rejected all other profound elements of the Christian Gospel as 'Pauline' accretions which must be stripped from the 'simple Gospel of Jesus'. (12)

As well as being heretical in its interpretation of the Gospel, it is also heretical in its observation of human behaviour. It does not match experience to say that if sufficient people were to become pacifists, then wars would cease.

Therefore Niebuhr concludes that for the Church to refuse to espouse pacifism is not apostasy - as has been claimed - but a rejection of heresy based on an insufficient understanding of sin.

It is relevant here to point out, in our comparison of Brunner with Niebuhr, that just as their conclusions are similar in the case of war and pacifism, their routes to these conclusions are different in exactly the

same way as they were different when dealing with the concept of 'the State'. Brunner approached his work on the state from the principle of the 'call' or the 'order' of God. He then extended this to disclaim absolute pacifism on the basis that the State is that which must be protected because it is the result of God's call. Niebuhr approached both subjects from the principle of 'man as sinner'. In his dealing with the issue of the state he explored the tension between individual and group morality. Similarly, in his dealing with the issue of pacifism, he further examines the nature of sin, and sees the espousal of pacifism as a misinterpretation of the Christian faith - namely an ignoring of the power of sin. It is important that we realise that Niebuhr did not deny that man has a capacity for justice and love. He simply urged that his capacity for injustice must also be taken into account. This is important part of Niebuhr's thinking and serves as an example of the way in which he tended towards the 'pessimistic' view of the nature of man.

From this point he examines the ethic of Jesus and concludes that it is indeed uncompromising and absolute. He criticises those who, engaged in the relativities of the political scene, seek to justify themselves by claiming that Jesus was also dealing in relativities. To reduce the ethic to cover relative standards is to reduce it to a new form of legalism. As we saw in Niebuhr's dealings with the subject of love, the significance of the command 'to love your neighbour' is that it is not just another law - but a law which transcends all other laws.

Attempts to relativise involve the pacifist in, for example, distinguishing between two types of resistance. While they are forced to admit that no situation can be envisaged which makes all forms of resistance redundant, yet there must be a distinction between non-resistance and non-violent resistance. Apart from the fact that such a distinction can never be absolute, there is no evidence in Scripture for the doctrine of non-resistance. An ethic can enjoin both non-violent resistance, and non-resistance. But the truth is that such an ethic is not obeyed at any level - because of human sin. Resistance is a part of life, and the point of Niebuhr's refusal to distinguish between violent and non-violent

resistance - or, indeed, coercion - is part of his polemic against those who use a relative form of pacifism as an example of a high moral stance.

This argument is developed in many ways. He says that the total ethic can be summarised in the two injunctions: 'Love your neighbour as yourself', and: 'Be not anxious for your life'. Anxiety is a response to the failure of a man to assert himself in his very existence. Perfect trust in the providence of God is an ideal that can never be realised because of the freedom that man has to view his life and to seek to better it. It is a root of sin. Likewise, to love one's neighbour as oneself is a command which the most saintly of people would never claim to have perfectly obeyed. Therefore to suggest that if nations lived according this high ethic so that wars would be unnecessary is, in fact, empty rhetoric.

Further, this failure to recognise the contradiction between the law of love and the sin of man also leads to a misunderstanding of the concept of justice. It is because men are sinners that justice must be coerced and supported by law in order to avert anarchy or, indeed, tyranny. Governments must coerce - and there is a danger that they will coerce, not to achieve justice for its own sake, but to exercise power.

Niebuhr applies this theory to specific situations.

The refusal to recognise that sin introduces an element of conflict into the world invariably means that a morally perverse preference is given to tyranny over anarchy (war). If we are told that tyranny would destroy itself, if only we would not challenge it, the obvious answer is that tyranny continues to grow if it is not resisted. If it is to be resisted, the risk of overt conflict must be taken. The thesis that German tyranny must not be challenged by other nations because Germany will throw off its yoke in due time, merely means that an unjustified moral preference is given to civil war over international war. (13)

The Gospel, Niebuhr asserts, is more than the law of love. It deals with the fact that men violate the law of love. It is a question of whether the grace of Christ is primarily a power of righteousness, or an assurance of

divine mercy. In this context he argues that you cannot understand the ethical teaching of Christ without taking into account the eschatological dimension. In this world morally right action does not guarantee a happy outcome. On the contrary, good people often suffer for their goodness. It is only in the Kingdom that the universe will be totally transparent to value.

The New Testament does not, in other words, envisage a simple triumph of good over evil in history. It sees human history involved in the contradictions to the end. That is why it sees no simple resolution of the problem of history. It believes that the Kingdom of God will finally resolve the contradictions of history; but for it the Kingdom of God is no simple historical possibility. The grace of God for man and the Kingdom of God for history are both divine realities and not human possibilities". (14)

The law of love, which the pacifists claim to be the law of life, shows us that any action that falls short of the law of love is less than best. Therefore the various ways in which nations procure justice, and the various ways in which they use coercion in order to establish justice inevitably involve acts which are not primarily acts of love. Therefore we must see that any conflict which arises is not between sinners and righteous people, but between sinners. In history vengeance has played a part in settlements made after wars, and it can be said that after a war, justice is never far from vindictiveness. He concludes that:

The pacifist argument on this issue betrays how completely pacifism gives itself to illusions about the stuff with which it is dealing in human nature. These illusions deserve particular censure, because no one who knows his own heart very well ought to be given to such illusions. (15)

Niebuhr wrote this particular essay during the second world war, and he comments on the phenomenon of the rise of tyranny in Europe, which, he says, is the result of not discovering an international means of organising stability and justice. He also uses the principle of 'power' to describe

the dilemma. The balance of power is delicate - and a result of some form of justice, but, he says, a balance of power is inferior to a harmony of love. He uses the example of the family unit here. Women, he says, did not gain justice from men until they secured sufficient economic power to challenge male autocracy. Here he makes the point, in characteristic style, that 'There are Christian idealists today who speak sentimentally of love as the only way to justice, whose family life might benefit from a more delicate balance of power' (16)

The thesis here is that tyranny in nations is an extension of the tyranny which can exist in individuals. Also, there is no system of government that has 'right' completely on its side. Given that that is the case, he says that a simple Christian moralism is senseless and confusing. On the one hand it is senselessly uncritical to identify the cause of Christ with the cause of democracy, and on the other hand it is senseless when it seeks to correct this error by refusing to make any distinctions between relative values in history.

"In its profoundest insights, the Christian faith sees the whole of human history as involved in guilt, and finds no release from guilt except in the grace of God. The Christian is freed by that grace to act in history, to give his devotion to the highest values he knows, and he is persuaded by that grace to remember the ambiguity of even his best actions". (17)

Niebuhr concludes his essay by commending the Christian Church in its protection of pacifists and its appreciation of their testimony - even when, he says their testimony is marred by self-righteousness, because it does not proceed from a sufficiently profound understanding of the tragedy of human history.

Richard Harries, commenting on Niebuhr's views on pacifism summarises it thus:

There are real differences in assessing the place of pacifism in the church, yet perhaps this is part of the tension we are meant to feel. For it is the legitimate desire of the pacifist to universalise the moral claims he experiences that troubles the non-pacifist, and rightly troubles him. For it brings to bear that absolute standard in the light of which our compromises are seen for what they are, and to which we are called to conform so far as we can under the conditions of sinful finite existence .

(18)

- 1) *The Divine Imperative* P469
- 2) *Ibid* P469
- 3) *Ibid* P469
- 4) *Ibid* P696
- 5) *Ibid* P697
- 6) *Ibid* P471
- 7) *Ibid* P472
- 8) *Ibid* P473
- 9) *Ibid* P474
- 10) "Pacifism" An essay in *Christianity & Power Politics* (1940)
Included in *Reinhold Niebuhr, Theologian of Public Life* 1988
Ed. Larry Rasmussen. P237
- 11) *Ibid* P238
- 12) *Ibid* P239
- 13) *Ibid* P244
- 14) *Ibid* P247
- 15) *Ibid* P249
- 16) *Ibid* P250
- 17) *Ibid* P252
- 18) *Reinhold Niebuhr & The Issues of Our Time* Ed Richard Harries
P 120

CONCLUSION

We set out in this thesis to demonstrate to what extent Christian Ethics can be viewed as being essential in theology, as opposed to its being an application of theology - or even a completely separate discipline that is nevertheless not in dispute with Christian theology. Although there are a variety of solutions, the division between them is defined by the extent to which Christian ethicists are dependent on categories and disciplines outside Scripture. In other words, does the Christian Gospel contain within it an ethical system which is so different from other systems as to make it totally distinctive?

A further question which has been tackled is whether, if Christian ethics is distinctive, and different from any other system, is it applicable to those who do not espouse Christianity?

This thesis has given a qualified "yes" to both of these questions. On the one hand it has looked at the question of Natural Law theories that have been prevalent in the church's moral teaching for centuries, and on the other it has examined the 'ultra' Protestant teaching on Revelation and Justification by Faith. In the first case, Natural Law, the conclusion is that both Brunner and Niebuhr dismiss this as an answer, although they do not deny its existence and its influence on some form of natural morality. When they wrote, the Roman Catholic Church had not set itself the task of reforming its teaching on moral theology. After they wrote, and largely inspired by Vatican 2, the Roman Catholic position had radically altered. However, both would question the extent to which 'authority' in that church is valid as a means, either of imposing Natural Law theories, or of 'enforcing' reform. Although authority is a secondary issue, it remains true that any law, natural or otherwise, has to be enforced, and in the case of a moral law, has to be binding on the conscience. In the second case, that of 'ultra-protestant' teaching, both agree that an ethical theory, which depends entirely upon Revelation, does not take account of any 'natural morality', or acknowledgement of relativities.

If, on the one hand, Niebuhr and Brunner have dismissed traditional natural law theories, and on the other hand have dismissed the 'Barthian' position, it is valid to question whether they have a distinctive answer to the question of the moral dilemma, or whether their answer is a compromise between two unsatisfactory positions.

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that these two have, in fact, a distinctive and valuable contribution to make to the debate. Both start with an examination of the nature of man, and his relationship with God. In the case of Brunner, this is exemplified in his writing about the 'Divine Human Encounter'. The transformation brought about by this encounter - this 'entering into a sanctuary', makes man's approach to moral questions and choices totally different. Acknowledging that outwardly, man is still 'erring, imperfect and weak', Brunner now sees him being subject to the call of God, which is an individual call, leading him to establish himself, as one who has been called, into community. This call is, for Brunner, the start of the study and application of ethics. The 'call' of God renders man's behaviour in community different. The community starts with the concept of family, and proceeds through various stages until it embraces the idea of 'state'.

Niebuhr, in his examination of the nature of man, starts with the idea of 'man as sinner'. Man, as individual, and man in community, behaves in a way which is continually tainted with sin. He sees man's approach to every moral question as being the approach of a sinner - and man's hope in this approach is defined by 'grace' and redemption. Specifically, Niebuhr points to 'pride' as an overriding sin, and its consequence, the achievement of power, a social danger. Nobody, says Niebuhr, willingly gives up power. In his rejection of an Aristotelean definition of man - that is a definition which exalts the power of reason - Niebuhr singles out the idea of 'self transcendent freedom.' Man has a unique capacity to stand outside himself, and examine his own motives and choices. In his treatment of the concept of '*imago Dei*', Niebuhr agrees with Brunner along the lines of Augustine and Luther. Both take what is frequently described as a 'pessimistic' view of man - that is to say, a view of man as 'fallen' and therefore tainted

with sin. This is all the more remarkable in the case of Niebuhr, writing as he did in the midst of the American culture and the 'American Dream'.

Both writers cited 'love' as the ultimate Christian determinate. They tested this against the concepts of law and justice. Niebuhr, as we saw, found Brunner wanting in his analysis of justice, and Brunner, in turn, used eschatological categories to define the nature of love. Niebuhr concentrated on the transcendent nature of love - transcendent, that is, over law. Brunner concentrated on the 'personal' and 'individual' aspect of love. Within this context they examined the nature of revelation, and Niebuhr supported Brunner in his dispute with Karl Barth on the question of the existence of 'general revelation'.

However, the most important element of the thesis has been the need to keep their teaching - and in particular that of Emil Brunner - in the forefront of theological ethics. Niebuhr is, at the time of writing still popular - Brunner less so. In comparing the two we can see that Niebuhr is not merely the American voice of Protestantism, but a theologian of international significance. Similarly, Brunner, who broke ranks with the main stream of the 'Zurich' School of theology early in his life, deserves to be read, because, although one of the foremost Lutheran theologians of his day, he ventured as a theologian into the world of ethics.

Because their subject was ethics, and because this was for them not merely a matter of speculation, but a burning issue of faith, their personalities are apparent in their writings. Niebuhr portrays himself as the 'volcano' which Brunner described - continually aware of the flux and change of history. Brunner's writing is careful, measured and, on occasions, poetic. In terms of literature Brunner perhaps has the edge over Niebuhr. The important conclusion is that there were raised up these two eminent men tackling ethical issues, from within the heart of the Gospel, at the most turbulent period of world history.

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